

LINDAU NOBEL LAUREATE MEETINGS  
CONFESSIONS OF A LATIN AMERICAN LIBERAL

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I am especially grateful to the Council for the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings and the Foundation Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings for inviting me to deliver this lecture because, according to their 'whereases,' they are considering me not only for my literary work but also for my ideas and political views. Believe me when I tell you that this is something new. In the world in which I move most frequently, Latin America, United States and Europe, when individuals or institutions pay tribute to my novels or literary essays, they typically add an immediate "although we disagree with him," "although we do not always concur with him," or "this does not mean that we accept his (my) criticisms or opinions regarding political issues." After having grown accustomed to this bifurcation of myself, I am happy to feel reintegrated again thanks to this prestigious institution, which, rather than subject me to that schizophrenic process, views me as a unified being, the man who writes, thinks and participates in public debate. I would like to believe that both activities form part of a single, inseparable reality.

But now, to be honest with you and to try to respond to the generosity of this invitation, I feel I should explain my political position in some detail. This is not an easy task. I fear it is not enough to claim that I am – perhaps it would be wiser to say 'believe I am' – a liberal. The term itself raises the first complication. As you well know, "liberal" has different and frequently antagonistic meanings, depending

on who says it and where they say it. For example, my late beloved grandmother Carmen used to say that a man was a liberal when referring to a gentleman of dissolute habits, someone who not only did not go to Mass, but also spoke ill of the priests. For her, the prototypic incarnation of a "liberal" was a legendary ancestor of mine who, one fine day in my native city of Arequipa, in Peru, told his wife that he was going to the main square to buy a newspaper and never returned. The family heard nothing of him until 30 years later, when the fugitive gentleman died in Paris. "So why did that liberal uncle flee to Paris, Grandma?" "Why else, son? To corrupt himself of course!" This story may be the remote origin of my liberalism and my passion for French culture.

In the United States, and in the Anglo-Saxon world in general, the term "liberal" has leftist connotations and is sometimes associated with being a socialist and a radical. On the other hand, in Latin America and Spain, where the word was coined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe the rebels who fought against the Napoleonic occupation, they call me a liberal – or, worse yet, a neo-liberal -- to exorcize or discredit me, because the political perversion of our semantics has transformed the original meaning of the term – a lover of liberty, a person who rises up against oppression – to signify conservative or reactionary, that is, something which, when it comes from the mouth of a progressive, means to be an accomplice to all the exploitation and injustices befalling the world's poor.

Liberalism, in Latin America, was a progressive intellectual and political philosophy that, in the XIX century, opposed militarism and dictators, wanted the separation of Church and the State and the establishment of democratic and civilian culture. In most countries liberals were persecuted, exiled, send to prisons

or killed by the brutal regimes that, with few exceptions –Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay and no more-, prospered all over the continent. But in the XX century revolution, not democracy, was the aspiration of the political *avant-garde* elites, and this aspiration was shared by a great number of young people who wanted to emulate the guerrilla example of Fidel Castro and his “barbudos” in Sierra Maestra. Marx, Fidel and Che Guevara became the icons of the left and the extreme left. In this context, liberals were considered conservatives, defenders of the *status quo* and disfigured and caricaturized so much that their real political goals and authentic ideas only permeated small circles and were out of touch with large sections of society. The confusion about liberalism was so extended that Latin American liberals were obliged to dedicate much of their time to defend themselves against the distortions and ridiculous accusations they received from the left and from the right.

Only in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century things started to change in Latin America and liberalism came to be recognized as something deeply different from the Marxist left and the extreme right, and it is important to mention that this was possible, at least in the cultural sphere, because of the courageous endeavor of the great Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz and the magazines that he published, *Plural* and *Vuelta*. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the conversion of China to a capitalist (though authoritarian) country, political ideas also evolved in Latin America and the culture of freedom made important gains all over the continent.

That said, it is still difficult for many people to agree on the authentic meaning of the word “liberal”. To complicate matters further, even liberals

themselves cannot seem to fully agree on what liberalism means and what it means to be a liberal. Everyone who has had the opportunity to attend a conference or congress of liberals knows that these gatherings are often very entertaining because discrepancies prevail over agreements and because, as often happened with the Trotskyists when they existed, every liberal is in and of himself potentially both a heretic and a sectarian.

Because liberalism is not an ideology, that is, a dogmatic lay religion, but rather an open, evolving doctrine that yields to reality instead of trying to force reality to do the yielding, there are diverse tendencies and profound discrepancies among liberals. With regard to religion and social issues, liberals like me, who are agnostics as well as supporters of the separation between church and state and defenders of the decriminalization of abortion, gay marriage and drugs, are sometimes harshly criticized by other liberals who have opposite views on these issues. These differences of opinion are healthy and useful because they do not violate the basic precepts of liberalism, which are political democracy, the market economy and the defense of individual interests over those of the State.

For example, there are liberals who believe that economics is the field through which all problems are resolved and that the free market is the panacea for everything from poverty to unemployment, discrimination and social exclusion. These liberals, true living algorithms, have sometimes generated more damage to the cause of freedom than did the Marxists, the first champions of the absurd thesis that the economy is the driving force of the history of nations and the basis of civilization. It simply is not true. Ideas and culture are what differentiate civilization from barbarism, not the economy. The economy by itself, without the

support of ideas and culture, may produce optimal results on paper, but it does not give purpose to the lives of people; it does not offer individuals reasons to resist adversity and stand united with compassion or allow them to live in an environment permeated by humanity. It is culture, a body of shared ideas, beliefs and customs –among which religion may be included of course – that gives warmth and life to democracy and allows the market economy, with its competitive, cold mathematics of rewarding success and punishing failure, to avoid degenerating into a Darwinian battle in which, as Isaiah Berlin put it, “liberty for wolves is death to the lambs.” The free market is the best mechanism in existence for producing riches and, if well complemented with other institutions and uses of democratic culture, can launch the material progress of a nation to the spectacular heights with which we are familiar. But it is also a relentless instrument, which, without the spiritual and intellectual component that culture represents, can reduce life to a ferocious, selfish struggle in which only the fittest survive.

Thus, the liberal I aspire to be considers freedom a core value. Thanks to this freedom, humanity has been able to journey from the primitive cave to the stars and the information revolution, to progress from various forms of collectivist and despotic association to human rights and representative democracy. The foundations of liberty are private property and the rule of law; this system guarantees the fewest possible forms of injustice, produces the greatest material and cultural progress, most effectively stems violence and provides the greatest respect for human rights. According to this concept of liberalism, freedom is a single, unified concept. Political and economic liberties are as inseparable as the two sides of a medal. Because freedom has not been understood as such in Latin

America, the region has had many failed attempts at democratic rule. This was either because the democracies that began emerging after the dictatorships were toppled respected political freedom but rejected economic liberty, which inevitably produced more poverty, inefficiency and corruption, or because they led to authoritarian governments convinced that only a firm hand and a repressive regime could guarantee the functioning of the free market. This is a dangerous fallacy and was demonstrated in countries like Peru during the dictatorship of Alberto Fujimori and in Chile under Augusto Pinochet. True progress has never stemmed from these types of regimes. This explains why all the so-called "free market" Latin American dictatorships have failed. No free economy can function without an independent, efficient justice system and no reforms are successful if they are implemented without control and the criticism of public opinion that only democracy permits. Those who believed that General Pinochet was the exception to the rule because his regime enjoyed economic success have subsequently discovered, with the revelations about the murder and torture of thousands of citizens, secret accounts and millions of dollars stashed abroad, that the Chilean dictator, like all of his Latin American counterparts, was not only a murderer but also a thief.

Political democracy, freedom of the press and the free market are foundations of a liberal position. But, thus formulated, these three expressions have an abstract, algebraic quality that dehumanizes and removes them from the experience of the common people. Liberalism is much, much more than that. Basically, it is tolerance and respect for others, and especially for those who think differently from ourselves, who practice other customs and worship another god or who are non-believers. By agreeing to live with those who are different, human

beings took the most extraordinary step on the road to civilization. It was an attitude or willingness that preceded democracy and made it possible, contributing more than any scientific discovery or philosophical system to counter violence and calm the instinct to control and kill in human relations. It is also what awakened that natural lack of trust in power, in all powers, which is something of a second nature to us liberals.

We cannot do without power, except of course in the lovely utopias of the anarchists. But it can be held in check and counterbalanced so that it does not become excessive. It is possible to take away its unauthorized functions that quell the individual, that being who we liberals believe is the touchstone of society and whose rights we must respect and guarantee. Violating these rights inevitably unleashes a series of escalating abuses, which like concentric waves sweep away the very idea of social justice.

Defending the individual is the natural consequence of believing in freedom as an individual and social value par excellence because within a society, freedom is measured by the level of autonomy citizens enjoy to organize their lives and work toward their goals without unjust interference, that is, to strive for "negative freedom," as Isaiah Berlin called it in his celebrated essay. Collectivism was inevitable during the dawn of history, when the individual was simply part of the tribe and depended on the entire society for survival, but began to decline as material and intellectual progress enabled man to dominate nature, overcome the fear of thunder, the beast, the unknown and the other -- he who had a different color skin, another language and other customs. But collectivism has survived throughout history in those doctrines and ideologies that place the supreme value

of an individual on his belonging to a specific group (a race, social class, religion or nation). All of these collectivist doctrines -- Nazism, fascism, religious fanaticism and communism and nationalism-- are the natural enemies of freedom and the bitter adversaries of liberals. In every age, that atavistic defect, collectivism, has reared its ugly head to threaten civilization and throw us back to the age of barbarism. Yesterday it was called fascism and communism; today it is known as nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

A great liberal thinker, Ludwig von Mises, was always opposed to the existence of liberal parties because he felt that these political groups, by attempting to monopolize liberalism, ended up denaturalizing it, pigeonholing it, forcing it into the narrow molds of party power struggles. Instead, he believed that the liberal philosophy should be a general culture shared with all the political currents and movements co-existing in an open society supportive of democracy, a school of thought to nourish social-Christians, radicals, social democrats, conservatives and democratic socialists alike. There is a lot of truth to this theory. Thus, in recent past, we have seen cases of conservative governments, such as that of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and José María Aznar, which promoted deeply liberal reforms. At the same time, we have seen nominally socialist leaders, such as Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, Ricardo Lagos in Chile, and in our days, José Mujica in Uruguay, implement economic and social policies that can only be classified as liberal.

Although the term "liberal" continues to be a dirty word that every politically correct Latin American has the obligation to detest, essentially liberal ideas and attitudes have begun to contaminate both the right and the left on the continent of

lost illusions for some time now. This explains why, in recent years, Latin American democracies have not collapsed or been replaced by military dictatorships, despite the economic crises, corruption and failure of so many governments to realize their potential. Of course they are still there: Cuba has those authoritarian fossils, Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl, who after 54 years of enslaving their country, are the leaders of the longest dictatorship in Latin American history; and the ill-fated Venezuela now suffers at the hand of President Nicolás Maduro, the appointed heir of Commander Hugo Chávez, statist and Marxist policies that soon will transform Venezuela into a second Cuba. But they are two exceptions in a continent which, and this should be stressed, has never had so many civilian governments born after relatively free elections. And there are interesting and encouraging cases such as those of Brazil, where, first Lula da Silva and then Dilma Rousseff, before becoming presidents, espoused a populist doctrine, an economic nationalism and the traditional hostility of the left towards the market, but who, after taking power, practiced fiscal discipline and promoted foreign investment, private investment and globalization, although both governments have been deeply infected by corruption, as has always happened with populist regimes and have failed to continue with reform.

Populism more than revolution is today the major obstacle for progress in Latin America. There are many ways to define "populism"; but, probably, the more accurate is the kind of demagogic social and economic policies that sacrifice the future of a country in favor of a transient present. With fiery rhetoric infused with bravado, Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner has followed the example of her husband, the late President Néstor Kirchner, with nationalizations,

interventionism, controls, persecution of the independent press, policies that have taken to the brink of disintegration a country that is, potentially, one of the more prosperous of the world. Other sad examples of populism are the Bolivia of Evo Morales, the Ecuador of Rafael Correa and the Nicaragua of Sandinista commander Daniel Ortega, who, in various ways, still implement the state-controlled, centralist recipe that has caused so much devastation across our continent.

But they are the exception, not the rule, as was the case until quite recently in Latin America, where not only dictators are vanishing but also the economic policies that kept our countries in underdevelopment and poverty.

Even the left has been reluctant to renege on the privatization of pensions –which has occurred in eleven Latin American countries to date – whereas the more backward left in the United States opposes the privatization of Social Security. These are positive signs of a certain modernization of the left, which, without recognizing it, is admitting that the road to economic progress and social justice passes through democracy and the market, which we liberals have long preached into the void. If in fact the Latin American left has accepted liberal politics, albeit cloaked in a rhetoric that denies it, all the better. It is a step forward suggesting that Latin America may finally shed the ballast of underdevelopment and dictatorships. It is an advance, as is the emergence of a civilized right that no longer believes that the solution to problems is to knock on the door of the military headquarters but rather to accept the vote and democratic institutions and to make them work.

Another positive sign in today's Latin American scenario filled with uncertainty is that the old anti-American sentiment pervading the continent has diminished notably. The truth is that today, anti-Americanism is stronger in certain European countries like France and Spain than in Mexico or Peru. Certainly, the war in Iraq, for example, mobilized vast sectors across the European political spectrum, whose only common denominator seemed to be not a love for peace but the resentment and hatred of the United States. In Latin America, this mobilization was marginal and practically confined to the hard-line sectors of the far left, although in recent days the support by the United States of the Israeli invasion of Gaza and the ferocious massacre of the civilian population that has taken place has re-awakened the anti-American feelings that seemed vanished.

There are two reasons for the change in attitude toward the United States, one pragmatic and the other one principled. Latin Americans who have retained their common sense understand that for geographic, economic and political reasons, fluid, robust trade relations with the United States are indispensable for our development. In addition, U.S. foreign policy, rather than back dictatorships as it did in the past, now consistently supports democracies and rejects authoritarian tendencies. This has contributed to significantly reducing the distrust and hostility of Latin American democratic quarters toward the powerful neighbor to the North. This rapprochement and collaboration are crucial for Latin America to quickly advance in its fight to eliminate poverty and underdevelopment.

In recent years, the liberal who speaks before you today has frequently been entangled in controversy because he defended a real image of the United States, which passions and political prejudice have occasionally deformed to the point of

caricature. The problem those of us who try to combat these stereotypes face is that no country produces as much anti-U.S. artistic and intellectual material as the United States itself – the native country, let us not forget, of Michael Moore, Oliver Stone and Noam Chomsky -- to the extent that one must wonder if anti-Americanism is not one of those clever export products manufactured by the CIA to enable imperialism to ideologically manipulate the Third World masses. Previously, anti-Americanism was especially popular in Latin America, but now it occurs in some European countries, especially those clinging to a past that was, and that resist accepting globalization and the inter-dependence of nations in a world in which borders, once solid and inexpugnable, have become porous and increasingly faint. Of course, I certainly do not like everything that occurs in the United States. For example, I lament the fact that many states still apply the horror that is the death penalty, as well as several other things, such as the fact that repression takes priority over persuasion in the war on drugs, despite the lessons of Prohibition. But after computing these additions and subtractions, I believe that the United States has the most open, functional democracy in the world and the one with the greatest capacity for self-criticism, which enables it to renew and update itself more quickly in response to the challenges and needs of changing historical circumstances. It is a democracy which I admire for what Professor Samuel Huntington feared: that formidable mixture of races, cultures, traditions and customs, which have succeeded in co-existing without killing each other, thanks to that equality before the law and the flexibility of the system that makes room for diversity at its core, within the common denominator of respect for the law and for others.

In my opinion, the presence in the United States of some 50 million people of Latin American heritage does not threaten the social cohesion or integrity of the country. To the contrary, it bolsters the nation by contributing a cultural and vital current of great energy in which the family is sacred. With its desire for progress, capacity for work and aspirations for success, this Latin American influence will greatly benefit the open society. Without denouncing its origins, this community is integrating with loyalty and affection into its new country and forging strong ties between the two Americas. This is something to which I can attest almost firsthand. When my parents were no longer young, they became two of those millions of Latin Americans who migrated to the United States in search of opportunities their countries did not offer. They lived in Los Angeles for almost 25 years, earning a living with their hands, something they never had to do in Peru. My mother was employed for many years as a factory worker in a garment factory full of Mexicans and Central Americans, with whom she made many excellent friends. When my father died, I thought my mother would return to Peru, as he had requested. But she decided to stay there, living alone and even requesting and obtaining U.S. citizenship, something my father never wanted to do. Later, when the pains of old age forced her to return to her native land, she always recalled the United States, her second country, with pride and gratitude. For her there was never anything incompatible about considering herself both Peruvian and American; there was no hint of conflicting loyalties. And I think that the case of my mother is not exceptional, that millions of Latin Americans feel as she did and will be the living bridges between the two cultures of the continent that five centuries ago was integrated to western culture.

Perhaps this memory is something more than a filial evocation. Perhaps we can see a glimpse of the future in this example. We dream, as novelists tend to do: a world stripped of fanatics, terrorists and dictators, a world of different races, creeds and traditions, co-existing in peace thanks to the culture of freedom, in which borders have become bridges that men and women can cross in pursuit of their goals with no other obstacle than their supreme free will.

Then it will not be necessary to talk about freedom because it will be the air that we breathe and because we will all truly be free. Ludwig von Mises' ideal of a universal culture infused with respect for the law and human rights will have become a reality.

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