

Lecture: Domenico Losurdo

Liberty and Slavery. The Contradictions of real Liberalism

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On the 10 July 2013, the Luxemburg Institute for European and International Studies in association with the Italian Cultural Institute of Luxemburg organised a lecture by Professor Domenico Losurdo on “Liberty and Slavery: The Contradictions of real Liberalism” at the Casino Syndical, Bonnevoie in Luxemburg. In his introductory remarks, Dr. Armand Clesse referred to the Professor’s latest book “Liberalism: A Counter-History” as an important and fundamental criticism of liberal philosophy. During his speech, Professor Losurdo rejected the classical narrative and the glorification of liberalism. He shed light on its dark past, revealing that slavery has been a constant feature in the paradoxical evolution of liberal societies.

To begin, Professor Losurdo proposed to explore the very nature of liberalism. He did this by exposing the champions of the liberal doctrine, namely Great Britain and the United States of America, as major slave traders. As the largest colonial power, Great Britain based the development of its economy on the slave trade, a practice later adopted by the United States (US) and promoted by its founding fathers. The Italian professor argued that the institution of slavery, intrinsic to the formation of American society, contradicts the latter’s efforts to enshrine liberal values in all facets of political and economic life. He refuted the common justification for slavery as a universal phenomenon by explaining that unlike the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the Latin American wars of independence were followed by an abatement of slavery. Not only did the US re-

introduce slavery into regions where it had previously been abolished (e.g. Texas and California in the 19th century) but they proceeded to intensify the oppression, for example, by separating family members into different servitudes, a practice not permitted by the Code Noir of Louis XIV in France. According to Professor Losurdo, this period, generally hailed as the heyday of liberalism, coincides with the most oppressive form of slavery.

In an attempt to explain this paradox, Professor Losurdo referred to the concept of “Herrenvolk democracy” which may be considered as a middle course between the ideas advocated by Alexis de Tocqueville, for whom the US was the beacon of democratic values, and Victor Schoelcher who considered it beset by the worst kind of despotism. Borrowed from racist ideology, “Herrenvolk democracy” denotes a two-tier system in which the privileged classes benefit from political rights and entitlements whereas the inferior classes remain deprived and oppressed. The lecturer explained that despite the official abolishment of slavery in the aftermath of the American Civil war, the Herrenvolk ruling system prevailed. Just like ‘red’ slavery gave way to ‘black’ slavery, the latter was replaced by ‘yellow slavery’ or by semi-slavery imposed on the Indian and Chinese ‘coolies’. He stressed that this period, during which public lynchings were a frequent mass spectacle, was the most brutal phase in the history of the subjugation imposed on the American black people.

Professor Losurdo moved on to discuss the case of Great Britain, the other chief proponent of slavery. Even though the latter abolished slavery thirty years prior to the United States, it continued to exploit the inhabitants of its colonies. The lecturer focused in particular on the subjugation of the Irish and the expropriation of their land, which inspired the American model for dealing with the ‘Red Skins’.

Moreover, he explained that the British working class was considered as an inferior ‘caste’ or ‘race’ by the ruling class, showing that the postulates of liberalism did not apply to slaves and other inferior social classes.

In the concluding section of the lecture, Professor Losurdo pointed out that even the intellectual founders of liberalism followed the model of “Herrenvolk democracy”. In this context, he mentioned de Tocqueville, who as a supporter of democracy nonetheless favored the colonisation of Algeria and the oppression of its people. Similarly, John Locke, a shareholder of the African Royal Society (the society which implemented the slave trade), yet supposedly a key liberal thinker, also supported the notion of expropriation of American-Indians. For Professor Losurdo, liberalism and its most important proponents did not contribute to overcoming slavery. Losurdo concluded his lecture by stating the necessity to respect and to assimilate the enduring heritage of the liberal tradition (the necessity of limiting political power) in the future understanding of history.

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