

Enemies of Interculturalism: The Economic Crisis in Light of Xenophobia, Liberal Cruelties and Human Rights

I was invited to present some reflections on my own intercultural experiences as an Italian philosopher who emigrated to Iceland, especially in the context of the latter's much-televised banking collapse of 2008, without neglecting my own research on political theory. Thus, in what follows, I try to bring such seemingly disparate themes together, and discuss the notion of interculturalism, or at least some aspects relating to it within "the Nordic context" (NordForsk, "[Interculturalism and Diversities: Developing intercultural models and thinking in the Nordic countries \(IDIN\)](#)", n.d.), such as:

- (A) Failure in the "inclusion" of "minorities" (*id.*; cf. section 1 "Xenophobia"); and
- (B) Some of the defining "political... cultural, and economical [*sic*]" (*id.*) features of liberalism, which is today's political norm in Nordic states too, i.e.:
 - (Bi) Its contrariness to cruelty (cf. section 2 "Cruelty"); and
 - (Bii) Its inherent inability to get rid of it (cf. section 3 "Liberalism").

Before I proceed, allow me to say that I am a living token of inter- or multicultural thinking in a Nordic country (the distinction between them not being overly clear, at least to me). I am a citizen of two nations, i.e. Italy and Iceland; I was born and raised as a Catholic in Italy; educated in Italy, Iceland and Canada; I am married to a Presbyterian Scot and the father of two trilingual bi-confessional children; I have been a philosophy teacher in Canada, France, Great Britain, Italy and, above all, Iceland, the country where I have lived since 2003; and, as you can see, I am a scholar taking part in symposia and workshops abroad—thus far, in three different continents (i.e. Europe, America, Asia). Under all these guises, I have witnessed the beauty, but also the ugliness, of intercultural dialogue and lack thereof.

1. Xenophobia

Above all, after the onset of the international economic crisis in 2008, I have seen how

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quickly a minority or an individual “stranger” can be bullied, marginalised or excluded from a social body, to which she may believe to belong by virtue of, *inter alia*: learning the local language, befriending local inhabitants, participating in the local community life, contributing to the local economy, paying into the nation’s social insurance fund, fulfilling the legal conditions for asylum under human rights and humanitarian law, or raising children in the host community.

No social context is too low or too high for these unpleasant phenomena. I myself, a member of the lofty academic domain nominally devoted to universality—think of the meaning of the Latin word *universitas*—was harassed by an Icelandic colleague, who spared no opportunity to make me and other foreign-born staff members feel unwelcome, including a former US citizen that had resided in Iceland for longer than thirty years. Eventually, this colleague of mine was formally reprimanded by the rector of my university.

Still, I do not wish to dwell on a personal incident. Rather, I would like to tackle a little-known aspect of the so-called “second Icelandic miracle”.

After the first miracle, which consisted in the boom phase of a boom-bust cycle caused by standard neoliberal policies of liberalisation and privatisation over the 1990s and 2000s, a second miracle was performed. The new—now old—left-wing government of the country brought Iceland back to prosperity in just five years (2009-2013), i.e. about the time that the newly privatised three largest banks of the country had taken to bring Iceland to a world-resounding meltdown (2003-2008). (cf. [“The Picture—Small and Big: Iceland and the Crises”](#), *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* 9(3), 2013, for a more detailed account by my person of the crisis, its ideological origins and the 2009-2013 recovery).

Apart from many Icelanders, who have proven quite oblivious to the achievements of that cabinet, international observers have been amazed. In particular, some of the policies implemented—which included letting over-indebted private banks fail, freezing sovereign debt obligations, and the reintroduction of capital controls—were so unorthodox that they led Nobel-laureate US economist Paul Krugman (b. 1953) to praise Iceland as a “dramatic

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demonstration of the wrongness of conventional wisdom in these times [of crisis]" (["The Times Does Iceland"](#), July 8, 2012, 12:53pm). Incidentally, had Iceland been in the Eurozone, or merely the EU, rather than in the EEA, the room for unorthodox policies would have been more limited.

Still, amongst the policies implemented, there was also a sinister tightening of immigration rules, which led to the impossibility for non-EU residents to have their residency permits issued and renewed. We do not know how many people did not enter Iceland or left it because of this reason, as the research in this matter is still in progress (e.g. Guðný Björk Eydal & Guðbjörg Ottósdóttir, "Immigration and the economic crisis: The case of Iceland", 2009). Nevertheless, the effects of this change of policy were timidly acknowledged in the 2011 national report for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations (UN; cf. Government of Iceland, "[Icelandic Universal Periodic Review. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Icelandic National Report](#)", July 2011: p. 14)

I am not interested in discussing the legal specifics of the case, though later on I shall touch upon the issue of human rights. Rather, I take the tightening of immigration rules as an example of a characteristic feature of economic crises. By spreading panic and insecurity about the future, these crises lead to a stronger albeit possibly instrumental claim to national identity and self-protection (e.g. "Iceland for the Icelanders", or "Finland for the *true* Finns"); a sharper division between "us" and "them"; and the exclusion of human beings that are more easily excluded than others, i.e. the most vulnerable members of society.

Fuelled by the fear that economic uncertainty inevitably generates, xenophobia rarely targets white-collar foreign bankers or well-paid financial experts and consultants, who may actually have a share of penal responsibility *vis-à-vis* the economic crisis. On the contrary, it targets regularly foreign men, women and children belonging to the working class, if not to the underclass of the unemployed and petty criminals, who often live in the peripheries of urban centres, the *banlieues* of Paris, or of Malmö.

Whether physical, psychological or institutional, there is always a modicum of violence in

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xenophobia, which operates through a plethora of means, e.g. verbal abuse, social isolation, contrary legislation, reduced employment opportunities, ill-treatment by police or court officers, assault by street thugs. Often, this violence targets individuals that are perceived as dangerous foreigners and yet have done no harm to anyone else, that is, *innocent* persons.

2. Cruelty

Social psychologists Kemp, Brodsky and Caputo report violence to innocents to be one of the most commonly recognised forms of *cruelty*. Although they conclude that no clear-cut definition can be provided by mapping and comparing usages of “cruelty” and “cruel”, which vary enormously across populations, causing pain to innocents seems fairly commonplace (cf. Kemp, S., Brodsky, S.L. & Caputo, A.A., “How Cruel is a Cat Playing with a Mouse? A Study of People’s Assessment of Cruelty,” *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 26:2/1997, pp. 19-24; Caputo, A., Brodsky, S.L. & Kemp, S., “Understanding and Experiences of Cruelty: An Exploratory Report,” *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 140:5/2000, pp. 649-60).

Philosophers and political theorists often limit themselves to mapping and comparing linguistic usages too, just like social scientists. I myself have done it *qua* intellectual historian, having identified and categorised four main conceptions of cruelty in the history of Western thought (cf. [“No Pain, No Gain. The Understanding of Cruelty in Western Philosophy and Some Reflections on Personhood”](#), *Filozofia*, 65:2/2010, pp. 170-83). Yet, philosophers and other theorists often attempt something more daring, i.e. to provide *essential definitions*, which may capture the fundamental traits of a given phenomenon, or those traits that, if absent, make a certain thing into another. This is something that philosophers and political theorists still do, sometimes in indirect ways, since they try not to make use of metaphysically burdensome “essentialisms”.

For one, late Harvard professor Judith Shklar (1928-1992) defined it as follows: “Cruelty is... the wilful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear... [it is] horrible... [it] repels instantly because it is ‘ugly’... and disfigures human character.”

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(*Ordinary Vices*, Cambridge: Belknap, 1984: p. 51). In another text of hers, she writes: "Cruelty is the deliberate infliction of physical, and secondarily emotional, pain upon a weaker person or group by stronger ones in order to achieve some end, tangible or intangible, of the latter." ("The Liberalism of Fear", *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. by N. Rozenbaum, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989: p. 29).

Together with Richard Rorty (1931-2007), possibly the most famous US philosopher at the turn of the new century, Shklar championed the so-called "liberalism of fear", i.e. an advocacy of Western-style liberalism as the best bulwark against cruelty, which, following Montaigne (1533-1592), Shklar claimed to feed on *fear*. All three thinkers regarded fear as the most illiberal feeling in the human psyche, since "fear destroys freedom," i.e. the central value of the liberal tradition (*Ordinary Vices*, p. 2). As Rorty eloquently stated: "liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do." (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. xv-i).

3. Liberalism

I certainly agree with them on fear's ability to destroy freedom—and much else. Yet, is their understanding of liberalism warranted? It is my reasoned belief that it is not. Liberalism is not capable of opposing cruelty in any definitive way; nor fear, for that matter. Let me explain you why.

First of all, by granting the individual more personal freedom, liberalism grants each and every one of us more scope to do what we like, hence also more scope for cruelty. I need not remind you of the unspeakable tragedies of Oslo and Utøya, back in 2011, which were the result of one man choosing *freely* the path of cruelty, that is, free from, say, the constant scrutiny from public authorities that the average East German citizen would have had to endure before 1990.

Secondly, liberal institutions include penal ones, which are constitutionally mandated to mete out punishments. Now, as necessary and even beneficial as the lawfully sanctioned punishments may be, they are a form of cruelty. Not even the great penal reformer of the

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Age of Enlightenment, Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794), thought it possible for punishments to be purified from cruelty. More rational methods could be implemented, unnecessary pain could be avoided; yet, the *nature* of penal sanctions remained, in his view, quintessentially cruel. As Beccaria writes: “punishments” are “atrocious” and their “public and solemn cruelty” can only be lessened by making them “useful... necessary... fair” and consistent with “the goal of the laws.” (*Dei delitti e delle pene e Commento di Voltaire*, Roma: Newton, ?1994: pp. 22-31; translation mine)

Significantly, the great Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie (b. 1928) has argued that standard penal justice is *doubly* cruel because it does not take in consideration: (1) the alternatives available (e.g. treatment, conciliatory debate or reconciliation, public apology and restitution, forgiveness); and (2) it ignores decades of studies showing that penal justice as we know it, has never attained its prime end, i.e. social order (*Limits to Pain*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1981).

Thirdly, Beccaria acknowledges the cruelty inherent to the economic system that liberals—himself included—have defended since the 17th century. In *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), the chapter about the crime of theft reads:

[T]his is generally the crime of misery and despair, the crime of that unhappy part of men to whom (the terrible, and perhaps unnecessary right to) property has allowed nothing but a bare existence, {and since fines only increase the number of criminals above the original number of crimes, and take bread from the innocent in order to take it from the villains} the most fitting punishment shall be the only sort of slavery that can be called just, namely the temporary enslavement of the labour and person of the criminal to society, so that he may redress his unjust despotism against the social contract by a period of complete personal subjection. (p. 42)

Beccaria is admitting that the liberal conception of the economy, insofar as it institutes private property rights, is responsible for the conditions of misery that make this particular crime emerge. The right to own property privately, “terrible” and “perhaps unnecessary” as it

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is, lies at the core of the liberal political, legal and economic system. Yet, it is also the source of pauperism, for it allows certain members of society to have much more than they need, while leaving others' needs unmet. In turn, pauperism is the source of theft. And theft, which is indeed a crime, has to be repressed *via* "atrocious punishments".

It may sound surprising that Beccaria could speak so loudly of the horrors of private property, but it is often forgotten that 18th-century liberals had often a drier and more candid perception of things than most of their contemporary heirs, who still retain the original faith in both penal justice and private property, but tend to couch it in anodyne terms. Besides, the potential horrors of private property were not a new discovery: Jesus of Nazareth, Thomas More, Blaise Pascal and John Milton had already warned humankind about the temptations of material wealth, long before doubts on the paradigm of rational self-maximisation in global finance or the greed associated with the pursuit of shareholder value as system-defining goal ever emerged—Mammon has long been known to be a demon from Hell.

Concluding remarks on Human Rights

With all its flaws, we may still deem the liberal system better than the alternatives. I am not going to enter this debate here today. Quite simply, I want to let you reflect on some of the strings that are attached to this political, legal and economic system. Indeed, the on-going international economic crisis, with its socially destructive effects, is one of such strings. What I am re-stating here today, is the wisdom of a well-known adagio: *there is no such thing as a free lunch*.

But do not think that I am being dismal or pessimistic. It may well be true that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Life involves hard times and painful choices. Still, through collective action and/or inaction, the menu of the lunch that we pay for can be changed. Think, for one, of the imposition of austerity measures in great part of Europe as a result of the economic crisis. Somehow, it has been argued, the emergency situation or the conditions

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of *force majeure* require Europe's societies to retrench from human rights provisions sanctioned in binding international treaties, especially but not exclusively the European Convention on Human Rights (signed 1950, effective 1953) and the UN's International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (s. 1966, e. 1976; cf. R.L. Johnstone & A. Ámundadóttir, "Defending Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Iceland's Financial Crisis", *Yearbook of Polar Law*, Vol. 3: pp. 454-77).

Yet, as the Icelandic example demonstrates, the same emergency situation can be appealed to in order to make the property rights of State creditors and wealthy investors secondary, while prioritising precisely those economic, social and cultural rights to which much of Europe has legally committed itself. That is at least what Iceland's fairly peaceful "kitchenware revolution" of 2009, which forced the lawfully elected right-wing government headed by Geir Haarde to step down and new elections to be held, achieved to some extent and certainly more than any other crisis-stricken small country in Europe, such as Latvia and Ireland (e.g. B. Thorhallsson & P. Kirby, "[Financial crises in Iceland and Ireland: Does EU and Euro membership matter?](#)", Centre for Small State Studies, 2011). Even in times of crisis, we can be masters of our fate. *There is no such thing as a free lunch, but there is such a thing as freedom.*

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