

Charles Bernstein and Ian Probst for
<http://liberal.ru/>

They say that Russian liberalism, like many Central and Eastern European liberalisms, was a child born by elites formed during Cold War. How would you define American liberalism?

Liberalism is capitalism with a human face.

Or perhaps you could say: socialism with a human face.

In the American context, the word is vexed by competing, irreconcilable meanings. Liberalization (support for democratic, secular, “open” society) is a force for freedom. But “liberal,” in Cold War America, also meant an unjustified faith in free markets as cover for prioritizing the interests of rich corporations and individuals.

Phil Ochs’s 1966 song “Love Me I’m a Liberal,” captured the sense of liberals as refusing to confront the structural problems of racism and imperialism, most blatantly in supporting the Vietnam War:

I cried when they shot Medgar Evers
Tears ran down my spine
I cried when they shot Mr. Kennedy
As though I’d lost a father of mine

But Malcolm X got what was coming
He got what he asked for this time
So love me, love me
Love me, I’m a liberal ...

I cheered when Humphrey was chosen
My faith in the system restored
And I’m glad the commies were thrown out
Of the A.F.L.C.I.O. board

I love Puerto Ricans and Negros
As long as they don’t move next door ...

American “free” society was free for only some, while sponsoring a reign of terror on “others.”

Still, the rule of law and freedom of speech are fundamental. Without them, things get worse; much worse.

American Cold War liberalism used anti-Communism as a way to shut down domestic dissent. On the poetry front, that meant praising formally conventional poetry with liberal, “humanist” values – the Great Man fighting against totalitarianism — while trashing (or ignoring) poetry that explored alternative voicings and modes of expression. “Individualism” morphed into aesthetic

conformity because liberal humanist poetics rejected the significance of framing, form, and ideology, in its quixotic quest for sincere expression.

You wrote "The Ballad Laid Bare" and "Our United Fates" included in Near/Miss, also published in the Russian edition, several years ago. Has the situation in the US worsened since then?

On the worse side: global warming, income inequality. The Republican party has made explicit what was always implicit: that it stands for racism and kleptocracy. Unfortunately, the "liberal" press has not been up to the challenge.

During the last presidential campaign, National Public Radio said it would not call Trump's lies *lies*; that is their "Phil Ochs" moment of liberal "fairness." NPR commissioned "Our United Fates" but refused to air it, either because it didn't have the right tone, or it violated NPR's commitment not to challenge its audience with "difficulties."

Accessibility is the opium of the masses!

("Laid bare" in the title of my ballad a reference to Shklovsky's "Art as Device.")

Perhaps, though, the Republicans' current branding will haunt their party in the years to come. But even if that is true, the damage done in the meantime is irreversible.

The furious revanchist cultural politics the Republicans are using to their electoral advantage is largely a response of progressive social change since the 60s. Many of the values of 1968 have been realized on the ground. The Republican ability to seize state control does not represent democratic rule but a rigged system. Trump lost the popular vote by a significant margin, despite voter suppression and the fact that almost 40 percent of those eligible (and less than half of those 18-29) did not vote. [www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html]

Do you think that Bernie Sanders is a radical, a socialist akin to Marxism?

No. He is what they call in Europe "center-left": a democratic socialist. But he refuses to be a "liberal" in the Phil Ochs sense, which is why he is such a galvanizing figure.

Wasn't there obstruction of justice before the Ukrainian scandal?

Of course.

Just think of the many coups planned by our national leaders, where U.S. involvement was vehemently denied. Or the lies that escalated our wars in the Middle East and southeast Asia. What's unusual here is the overtness of the rhetoric (flaunting the illegal actions) and the use of a foreign power, Russia, to corrupt U.S. elections.

There is something comic, if not funny, about the Republicans colluding with Putin and refusing to accept the findings of the CIA or the military. For someone growing up in the Cold War, it's a stunning reversal. All the more tragic when it means the Republicans, by doing Putin's bidding, are abandoning the Ukrainians.

I heard one of my fellow professors that the majority did not watch the impeachment proceedings because they were just busy shopping before Christmas, Chanukah, or the New Year. Was he right?

Trump is mirrors, smoke, and snake oil. His malevolent antics distract from his even more malevolent actions. Every time his lies are repeated, even if labelled as “false,” he wins. He controls the representation of reality because we let ourselves be baited by him.

As George Lakoff would insist, we need to reframe the discussion. Ant that’s where poetics comes in.