

La llamada de la tribu (The Call of the Tribe),
by Mario Vargas Llosa

Reviewed by Clarence Zuvekas & Jim Elliott
(June 12, 2019)

OVERVIEW [pp. 11-19]

Mario Vargas Llosa (b. 1936) won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2010 but lost his 1990 race for the Presidency of Peru. Should we, then, be reading one of his great novels instead his account of how seven notable thinkers from various disciplines influenced the evolution of his economic and political thinking from communism to socialism to liberalism? We should do both.

MVL sometimes treats communism and socialism as political systems, although Karl Marx described them as economic systems. (The fiction perpetrated by “Communist” political leaders, we may add, is that they aspire to the ultimate achievement of a communist economy, in which the state will have withered away—but not in their lifetimes, of course.) Interestingly, MVL sometimes leans toward characterizing liberalism as an economic system, avoiding the term “capitalism.” But his concept of liberalism is actually broader, as we shall see below. (We might add editorially that all of these -isms, and the term “democracy,” have been so misused over the years that their meaning has become muddled.)

In the introductory chapter of *La llamada de la tribu*, MVL recounts how, at the age of 12, his political consciousness was aroused by the 1948 military coup in Peru that brought to power Gen. Manuel Odría—a truly nasty piece of work. As a teen, MVL was particularly influenced by the French novelist, existentialist philosopher, and Marxist, Jean-Paul Sartre, who tried unsuccessfully to dissuade the Nobel committee from awarding him his own Prize for literature in 1964. (Sartre’s literary work is also worth reading; the philosophical tomes are turgid.)

By the mid-1950s MVL had moved to socialism but still strongly supported the Castro revolution in Cuba well into the 1960s. But a trip to the Soviet Union in 1968, he says, “left a bad taste in my mouth.” And events in Cuba, mainly related to repression of freedom of speech, led to his break with that regime “and, in a certain sense, with socialism.” “Nevertheless,” he continues, “breaking with socialism and reevaluating democracy took me a number of years.” “With all its imperfections, which were many, democracy at least replaced arbitrariness with law and would permit free elections and political parties and trade unions that are independent of governmental power.” (Here MVL seems to be regarding socialism as a political system in

contrast to democracy, but elsewhere he admits the existence of “democratic socialism,” which shares some values with liberalism but, in his view, hasn’t always worked well in practice.)

Visiting England in the 1970s and 1980s, MVL observed and was impressed by the efforts of Margaret Thatcher (prime minister from 1979 to 1990), to make British citizens less dependent on the State. Both of the main political parties, he says, had increased this dependence through nationalizations and other controls that had made the British economy less competitive internationally. Thatcher set out to reverse these policies. While Ronald Reagan undertook similar efforts in the United States, MVL found his (effective) espousal of liberalism to be rather general, while Thatcher’s was “more precise and ideological,” openly influenced by Friedrich Hayek and Karl Popper. Intrigued, and despite his disagreements with Thatcher over her social policies, which he found conservative or even reactionary, MVL started reading Hayek and Popper, and he devotes a chapter to each of them in this book.

The Call of the Tribe. MVL notes that neither Thatcher nor Reagan, although effective in implementing their policies, lacked the attributes of the charismatic leader, such as Hitler, Mussolini, Perón, or Fidel Castro, who could appeal to the “tribal spirit,” the primitive irrationalism hidden in all civilized human beings (Popper) and “the source of nationalism, [which has] caused, with religious fanaticism, the greatest massacres in the history of humankind.” In Great Britain, he says, “the call of the tribe” manifests itself mainly at soccer games and popular music concerts, where the individual is swallowed up by the crowd. But in other countries, the forces of democratic and liberal culture (ultimately, rationality) that have been freeing us from the call of the tribe are weaker, leading the masses to tie their fortunes to nationalist caudillos who reject culture, democracy, and rationality—the kind of leader MVL strongly opposed from the days of his youth. And now MVL had come to realize that “nothing represented the return to the ‘tribe’ as much as communism.”

MVL read widely during his time in England to deepen his understanding of liberalism. In addition to Hayek and Popper, whom we’ve already mentioned, the thinkers discussed in this book are Adam Smith, José Ortega y Gasset, Raymond Aron, Isaiah Berlin, and Jean-François Revel. Others whom MVL mentions having read are Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman, Juan Bautista Alberdi (Argentina), and Carlos Rangel (Venezuela), the latter two being “truly exceptional cases of genuine liberalism in the Latin American continent.”

MVL cautions that “liberalism should not be understood as just another ideology,” and, following Hayek, he distinguishes it from conservatism. “Liberalism is a doctrine that does not have answers to everything, as Marxism claims to have, and at its core it allows for disagreements and critiques, based on a small but unmistakable set of core beliefs. . . . Liberty is the supreme value and it should be manifest in all realms—economic, political, social, cultural—in a truly democratic society.”

The inability to see liberalism as an overarching concept, he argues, has led to the failure of despotic governments to stimulate economic freedom; they have not understood that market

policies are inconsistent with political repression. By the same token, democratic governments in Latin America that have protected political liberty but not economic freedom have also failed.

Here are some of MVL's additional observations about liberalism:

- “Liberalism is not dogmatic; it knows that reality is complex and political ideas and programs often need to adapt in order to be successful, instead of trying to insert reality into rigid frameworks, which will only make them fail and lead to political violence.”
- A dangerous sect within liberalism, to which some economists adhere, is the belief that “the free market is a panacea capable of resolving all social problems.” Adam Smith, he notes, knew better. (MVL went so far as to lay flowers on Smith's grave.)
- “We liberals are not anarchists, nor do we wish to suppress the State. On the contrary, we want a strong and effective State—which does not mean a large State that is determined to do things that civil society can do better in a framework of free competition. The State should ensure freedom, public order, respect for the law, equality of opportunity.”
- Equality before the law and equality of opportunity do not mean income equality. Ignoring different individual capacities would lead to “the disappearance of the individual, his immersion into the tribe.”
- Because income inequalities in some countries are very large, “‘equality of opportunity’ is a profoundly liberal principle, although this is denied by small gangs of dogmatic, intolerant, and sometimes racist economists—Peru has a lot of them and they are all Fujimoristas—who abuse this title.” Therefore a system of high-quality public education is essential, without suppressing private education, which among other things provides necessary competition. For higher education, children of wealthy families should pay the costs of their studies, while scholarships and other assistance should be available to families with less ability to pay.
- “A small State is generally more efficient than a large one. . . .The more the State grows, . . . the more it diminishes the margin of freedom that citizens enjoy.”
- “Decentralization of power is a liberal principle, to maximize the controls that society as a whole has over various social and political institutions.”
- “Liberal doctrine has represented from its beginnings the most advanced forms of democratic culture, and it has made the most progress in free societies in [the areas of] human rights; freedom of expression; the rights of sexual, religious, and political minorities; defense of the environment; and participation of the everyday citizen in public

life. In other words, it has done the most to defend us from the inextinguishable call of the tribe.”

Reflecting on his loss in Peru’s 1990 presidential election in 1990, the campaign for which began in 1987, MVL notes with some satisfaction that “many of the [liberal democratic] ideas we defended . . . , far from disappearing, have opened paths in an ever-growing number of sectors, so that they constitute part of Peru’s current political agenda.” Perhaps the most dramatic example of this change is the contrast between the first presidential term (1985-90) of the late Alan García—whose efforts to nationalize the financial system and otherwise expand State control ended in economic collapse and hyperinflation and inspired MVL to make his presidential run—and García’s second term (2006-11), which saw the implementation of more market-oriented policies, with better results.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES: THINKERS WHO INFLUENCED VARGAS LLOSA

Vargas Llosa discusses his thinkers in the chronological order of their birth years, starting with the father of economics and moral philosopher, Adam Smith (b. 1723), and ending with the French philosopher turned polemical journalist, Jean-Francois Revel (b. 1924).

Adam Smith (1723-1790) [pp 31- 68]

Adam Smith was a member of a political economy club in the 1760s. He attended meetings of like-minded people, liberal thinkers and drinkers meeting regularly in the taverns of Glasgow. Smith himself abstained from imbibing alcohol, and he noted in the *Wealth of Nations* that nations exporting liquor tend to be more temperate in their drinking habits than net importers of the stuff. In the course of these sessions he often would go off into a kind of “not there” trance, during which presumably he was working out in his mind the details of his research.

Here are some takeaways from MVL’s readings of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*.

- MVL neatly summarizes in just a few pages (pp. 48-64) what he aptly describes as Smith’s “oceanic” book, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776)—that massive 902-page description and analysis of how capitalist economies work (and will work for as long as capitalism as celebrated by Smith and MVL survives and evolves). For those of us who haven’t read *The Wealth of Nations* in a while, or ever, this is the place to go for getting the gist of it in a few minutes. MVL also has interesting observations about the book’s life in Spanish translation from 1790, and why the conservative Catholic church of the time put it on the index as a dangerous book. The only better and shorter summary in one of your reviewers’ (Elliott’s) opinion is that of his late professor William N. Parker’s multiple-stanza “Wealth of Nations, Writ for me / Let me wrap myself in thee” which Parker wrote to be sung to the tune of “Rock of Ages.”

- MVL gives equal importance to Smith's first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759, which MVL also summarizes in just a few pages and considers a complement to *The Wealth of Nations*. According to MVL, Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* argues that human nature wants to please, to get along with one's fellow human beings, to not offend them. This provides the glue for civil society, which "glue" a capitalist economy, based on calculation of the individual's self-interest, needs to function. MVL also cites Smith's concept of the impartial onlooker or spectator as a fair and impartial judge of other people's actions, as a key element in making a human society function.
- Equality of opportunity is desirable – everyone should have effective access to schooling and higher education.
- In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, MVL notes, Smith inveighs against mean-spirited national feeling and envy of one's neighbors' happiness and internal prosperity, saying that such sentiments ("the mean principle of national prejudice against another nation") are unworthy of great countries such as France and England. The book appeared during the Seven Years War between France and England (1756-1763), during which national sentiments must have run a bit high on both sides, and France lost Canada to England.
- Smith rebukes high government officials and high-falutin' theorists, who in pursuit of grand theoretical schemes would organize the King's subjects like pieces on a chessboard instead of giving proper scope for individual initiative and freedom of action. Smith also opposed the blanket restrictions on sending technology abroad that were in effect in the England of his time. Such restrictions, as MVL reads Smith, are inconsistent with the individual's freedom of action in economic life, of which England boasted.
- In *Wealth of Nations*, MVL points out, Smith gives a classic statement of the role of stock (capital) accumulation and use in production by private merchants and manufacturers operating with the profit motive as the mainspring of economic progress. He shows how the profit motive has led to the substitution of banking money (notes) for coins of precious metal—a useful cost-saving innovation that promotes economic growth.
- Labor should be free to move to where there is work for higher wages. Widespread chronic poverty is bad for a country. Internal mobility of labor is desirable and should not be restrained.
- MVL mentions Edmund Burke, a liberal who twice was to turn conservative in his later years, as a favorable commentator on *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and as being among the leading lights Smith met with in London in his later years, after he established his reputation. Burke began his political career as a liberal Whig working for the Whig leader Lord Rockingham in the 1750s, but in reaction to the French Revolution he adopted a more conservative stance. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790),

and in subsequent publications, such as the sequel to *Reflections*, “An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs” (1791), Burke spoke out against English enthusiasts welcoming the French Revolution and what he saw as its early excesses. (Smith died before the French Revolution got going on a major scale. It would have been interesting to have had his as well as Burke’s reaction to it). MVL’s well-balanced, temperate approach reminds one of us of Burkean liberal conservatism as expounded in the *Reflections on the Revolution*.

- “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation” is how political scientist Camil Ungureanu sums up the later Burke in his introduction to a 2010 publication of *Reflections*. The trick is how to effect needed changes without falling into the excesses of the French Revolution or succeeding revolutions in various countries, such as Russia, while preserving inherited freedoms and institutions.

José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) [pp. 69-98]

One suspects that Ortega y Gasset is included for his graceful, clear writing style and merited fame among Spanish-speaking audiences. MVL comments on Ortega y Gasset’s prescient (although as MVL shows, somewhat blinkered) view of the United States as “lacking culture” in his major work, *The Revolt of the Masses*. MVL emphasizes Ortega y Gasset’s analysis of the then-apparent tendencies toward regional particularism in Spain, which are still with us today; his attempt to play a political role in the ill-fated Spanish Republic; and his subsequent tragic situation vis-à-vis vis the Franco regime, which defeated the Republic in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s.

Friedrich August von Hayek (1899-1997) [pp. 99-139]

Hayek is one of the three 20th-century thinkers who most influenced MVL’s thinking. MVL celebrates Hayek as a great champion of personal liberty and a proponent of economic and social liberalism. However, MVL believes Hayek went too far in his sweeping warnings against even the least bit of government regulation and guidance of the economy. Hayek tended to see any departure from the liberalism he championed as a fatal step onto the slippery slope of socialism that inevitably would lead to a totalitarian system in which the worst rise to the top and stay there. He therefore urged resistance to any steps toward government planning or action to stabilize the economy (e.g. standard monetary and fiscal policy) and to promote economic growth and equity.

Paul Samuelson criticized Hayek’s views in various editions of his best-selling introductory textbook, much to Hayek’s discomfiture and chagrin. Although Hayek received the Nobel Prize in economics in 1974, his purely economic work (e.g. theory of capital, business cycles) has received little academic acceptance. Milton Friedman’s appraisal of Hayek’s capital theory as “unreadable” is a less than stellar one.

Although Hayek was praised by the then young conservative pundit William F. Buckley Jr. and others in the vanguard of the 1950s American conservative revolution, ironically Hayek did not consider himself a conservative in any way. He presented “Why I Am Not a Conservative” at a 1957 meeting of the Mont Pelerin society, and many years later it was reprinted in Hayek’s 1978 book, *Constitution of Liberty*.

Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom* interpreted the Nazi regime in Germany as an outgrowth and inevitable result of socialism, plain and simple, a view that one noted American economist thought simplistic. But Hayek’s book was serialized by Reader’s Digest and became a best seller.

Linda Yueh, in her 2018 book, *What would the Great Economist Do?* (reviewed by our group a few months ago), noted that “With capitalism itself now under attack in the wake of the Great Recession by the Occupy movement and others, Hayek’s ideas have come back into fashion as the search continues for arguments to defend the market system against growing skepticism.” On the other hand, she notes that Hayek’s theories have gained little academic acceptance.

Sir Karl Popper (1902-1994) [pp. 141-203]

Like Hayek, Popper was originally from what was then Austro-Hungarian Empire. A socialist in his youth (unlike Hayek), by his thirties Popper had rejected socialist bureaucracy and embraced and developed liberalism. He championed the open society against its tribalist enemies (*The Open Society and its Enemies*, 1945). He opposed, with the Boehm-Bawerk/von Mises “Austrian School of Economics” in Vienna, to which Hayek belonged, both the conservative and anti-theoretical German Historical School of economics as well as of Marxian “historicism.”

A Protestant from a Jewish family that had converted to Christianity, and a loyal citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire whose dissolution at the end of World I had devastating economic consequences for its constituent parts, Popper opposed nationalism of every stripe. For this reason, Popper, like von Mises and Hayek, would not be a favorite of Yoram Hazony, whose book, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, our group discussed last month.

Although he was not an economist, Popper, as MVL points out, first appeared in English in the pages of *Economica*, the LSE’s economics journal in which Ronald Coase, founder of the “New Institutional Economics” and winner of the 1991 Nobel Prize, also published. Popper was invited to the LSE by his fellow Austro-Hungarian, von Hayek, with the concurrence and support of British economist and LSE faculty member Lionel Robbins.

Raymond Aron (1905-1983) [pp 205-233]

Aron was a crusader against totalitarian communism and those who played footsie with it in postwar France. He was a member of the resistance against the Nazis during WWII.

Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-2007) [pp. 235-279]

MVL regards Berlin as one of the three thinkers (along with Hayek and Popper) whose works have most influenced him. He emphasizes at the close of this chapter that Berlin expressed doubts about full-blown, Hayek-style economic liberalism and its tendency towards dogmatism. MVL finds Berlin's tolerance and appreciation of views different from his own, including conservative and even reactionary and tribalistic views, to be one of this thinker's most attractive traits. This tolerance and openness were exemplified in Berlin's brilliant biography of Karl Marx, cited by MVL.

Berlin had an appreciation of the irrational that is absent in most liberal thinkers. MVL notes that this appreciation, and his sympathetic understanding of tribal atavistic feeling, is exemplified in Berlin's studies of the reactionary 18th century German philosopher Johann Georg Hamann—who couldn't get along even with contemporaries who admired him—and of such figures as the Piedmont Kingdom's diplomat Joseph de Maistre, whose views are sometimes seen as a precursor of fascism. In Berlin's considered view, according to MVL, the tribal spirit is inevitable—it is part of human nature and has good as well as bad aspects. But it must be kept within bounds for a civil society to be achieved and maintained.

Jean-François Revel (1924-2006) [pp 281-311]

Revel was a philosopher, academic turned journalist and pamphleteer, and crusader against totalitarian communism. He was a socialist and a liberal at the same time, as one of MVL's subchapter headings puts it, but never a conservative. Like the right-wing Aron, Revel was very critical of the French Left of his time and of the French media, which he accused of slanting the news to fit various elites' preconceived notions, and of desiring to get along better with the Soviet Union by being accommodating to its leadership and, wittingly or not, promoting pro-Moscow pacifist views incompatible with successfully combatting the cold war against totalitarian communism.

Both Aron and Revel were contributors to *L'Express*, published by the Anglo-French financial buccaneer Jimmy Goldsmith.

Revel argues that democracies seem to be coming to their end, manipulated by the totalitarian state of the Soviet Union and its sympathizers in the west. MVL does not speculate on these views, but one wonders what Revel, were he alive today, would have thought of current developments and movements sweeping across the Europe and the United States, and the fact that Russian activity on the internet to influence public opinion and thereby voting results in the 2016 U.S. election seems not to bother about 40% of the our electorate.