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# INTRODUCTION: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF 'EUROPEAN' LIBERALISM

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ABSTRACT

The essays in this special issue centre around the notion of 'European' liberal thought and its relationship with 'national' liberal traditions. They explore the trajectory of such a relationship from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, examining how some of its national variations interacted with images of Europe, the ideological ambiguities underlying such views, and the role that intellectual networks played in shaping such a relationship. These articles reveal how liberal thought has been shaped by, and has responded to, various political, social, and cultural challenges that were at once European and national, emphasizing the role of transnational networks in spreading liberal ideas as well as shedding light on the complex interplay between liberalism and nationalism. Key themes include the persistent ambiguities inherent in liberalism, the geo-cultural dimensions of liberal ideas, and the evolving relationship between freedom and democracy. The aim is to offer fresh perspectives on a historically significant yet continually contested ideology, emphasizing the enduring relevance and complexity of liberalism in European history.

**Keywords**: European liberalism, Nationalism, Europeanism, Intellectual history, Transnational intellectual networks.

In the aftermath of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, an opinion began to circulate that the collapse of the Soviet Union, the decline of bipolarism, and the subsequent fading of the nuclear nightmare could, on the one hand,

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usher in a new era of peace and, on the other, establish the global dominance of the Western model, based on the combination of liberal democracy and the free market. As is well known, it is within this framework that the now famous thesis of the 'end of history' by Francis Fukuyama was shaped.[1] Drawing on a respected tradition of thought dating back to Immanuel Kant, Benjamin Constant, and Richard Cobden, Fukuyama boldly asserted that the ongoing processes of democratization worldwide would entwine with the increasing spread of economic prosperity and the pacification of international relations, and would finally bring about the end of all wars.[2] Throughout much of the 1990s, these ideas heavily influenced political debate, and led many to believe that the end of bipolarism might eventually inaugurate a new era in international relations. The latter would either be based on the *Pax Americana* and the unchallenged primacy of the remaining superpower, or on a multipolar order in which emerging powers like the European Union, China, India, and Brazil would play a crucial, and at least partially alternative, role to that of the United States.[3]

It did not take long for these predictions to be contradicted. Starting with the wars in the former Yugoslavia, leading to the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, and encompassing phenomena as diverse as Islamic terrorism on one hand and populism on the other, over the last three decades the Western model that seemed poised for global triumph has entered instead a profound crisis and has been increasingly contested both from the outside and within. One sign of the importance of such attacks is that even some of the most refined (if highly controversial) contemporary European intellectuals such as Michel Houellebecq now openly target the nihilism that Europe seems irremediably subject to.[4] Against the backdrop of such developments and the well-known and seemingly perennial 'crisis of Europe', which goes well beyond its external structures and touches its fundamental values, it is of crucial importance to re-examine these values. More specifically, it is now crucial to inquire into the current meaning of concepts such as freedom and democracy, explore the connection between them, and trace their trajectories within the European context from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Before focusing on the theoretical framework underlying the contributions gathered within this special issue, it is necessary to briefly specify the concrete opportunities that allowed us to embark on this

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1 Fukuyama 1989 and, more extensively, Fukuyama 1992.

2 Huntington 1991, and Mueller 1989.

3 Telò 2004; Beck and Grande 2005; Pernice 2005.

4 Toranian and de Viry 2015: 9.

journey. In this regard, we cannot forget that as early as 2021, drawing inspiration from the recent publication of a number of significant works,[5] we initiated a collaboration that, with the crucial support of prominent academic institutions, prestigious research centres, and authoritative funding bodies, led to two significant international conferences. These events were attended by both established scholars and younger researchers. The first conference took place in Turin, at the Collegio Carlo Alberto, between June 29 and July 1, 2022 and was entitled *Rethinking Liberal Europe: Ideas of Europe and Notions of Freedom between 1848 and 1945*. The second conference took place at Villa Vigoni from July 27 to 30, 2023, and was, in substantial continuity with the previous one, dedicated to the theme of *Europe, Democracy, and Notions of Freedom: Past and Present Challenges*. Given the wide chronological span considered and the number and diversity of the presentations made at these two conferences, we decided to publish a limited selection of them in the ensuing pages.

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Between 1921 and 1924, the Italian historian, Guido De Ruggiero, wrote his *Storia del liberalismo Europeo*. Soon translated into English and French, it became a work of reference for liberal thinkers across Europe. In it, De Ruggiero claimed that nineteenth-century liberalism had been fostered and had developed within the boundaries of western European nation-states, forming distinct English, French, German, and Italian liberal traditions. These 'liberties in the plural' were now engaged in a process of 'mutual assimilation', which would finally lead to 'a liberal European consciousness'. This 'liberty in the singular', De Ruggiero went on to argue, would eventually subsume all national views and traditions, merging them into a single vision that would retain and even enhance their core elements.[6] As De Ruggiero himself admitted many years later, his book had been unjustifiably optimistic. Indeed, it was published when liberties in Italy 'were being crushed', but also at a time when the reaction to the murder of the socialist MP, Giacomo Matteotti, gave hope that Mussolini's rule would soon come to an end.[7] Of course, De Ruggiero's confidence was misleading at best. Italy was soon to be followed by many – indeed, most – European countries on the path towards authoritarianism and totalitarianism. On the eve of the Second World War, liberalism was under siege in Europe. It was a force seemingly destined to disappear, unable to

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[5] See, for example Sluga 2021; Sluga and Clavin 2017; Rosenblatt 2018; De Dijn 2020.

[6] De Ruggiero 2003: 367.

[7] *Ibid.*: xxi.

stand firm against Fascism (in its various forms) on the one hand, as well as communism on the other – or so contended its enemies. Nation(s) and class(es), the true agents of history, would soon face one another, making of the 'dark continent' the battlefield of their final struggle.[8] But, to do so, they would first stamp out all vestiges of individual liberties and rights. In truth, the 1920s and 1930s were not the one and only historical juncture during which liberalism was threatened. Were one to consider it properly, the story of liberalism has largely been the story of a set of ideals and political forces constantly in danger – especially in continental Europe.[9]

Since the term 'liberal' was first coined in Spain, in the 1820s, liberal thinkers, activists, and politicians have made of their struggle against greater or lesser threats, stronger or wearier foes, a central element of their own self-representations. Despotic rulers at first and then conservative and socialist as well as fascist and communist leaders later on, were the formidable enemies to reckon with. Obviously, such struggles took on markedly different complexions in the various countries they were fought in, and even transcended national boundaries. This was the case during the Second World War – at least on the side of the United States and the United Kingdom – as well as during the Cold War when a part of Europe was 'kidnapped' and under the yoke of a despotic power that, for most liberal authors, was alien to the European mind.[10] It is telling that even shortly after 1989, when it seemed that liberalism (or, at least, the version embodied by the United States) had finally triumphed across the globe and that the struggle of its champions had come to an end, new enemies and new threats soon materialised, proving the fallacy of Fukuyama's aforementioned claims over the 'end of history'.[11] Today liberalism faces new dangers, such as those posed by more or less authoritarian states, the rise of populisms and new forms of nationalism in the West, and possibly its most dangerous enemy, namely, neoliberalism.

Returning to De Ruggiero's work, among the many questions it raised, and which are still relevant to our understanding of liberalism as such, was the distinction between 'liberalism in the singular' and 'liberalism in the plural'. In fact, it has often been argued that it might be more useful to speak of 'liberalisms' so as to emphasize the variegated nature of a phenomenon that has acquired different characteristics from the early nineteenth century

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[8] Mazower 1998.

[9] Gauchet 2007-2010.

[10] It was an argument made, for one, by Milan Kundera in 1983: Kundera 2023.

[11] Fukuyama has painted a much gloomier picture of liberalism and its future in Fukuyama 2022.

onwards, and which has interacted in very different ways with other political ideas and ideals.[12] Obviously, like most (and possibly all) political concepts, 'liberalism' too is a 'contested notion' and, hence, caution when trying to define it in a clear and unambiguous way is always necessary.[13] And yet, it has been noted, this might be a way of eluding the question, an *escamotage* allowing the scholar to avoid giving a precise definition of his or her object of enquiry, one that, most importantly, generates confusion over the core values of liberalism, rendering the latter term of limited worth to historians and political theorists.[14] Even more interesting (and less debated) is the question hinted at by De Ruggiero of the geo-cultural dimension of liberalism. That is, of the relationship between liberalism and the geographical and cultural contexts in which it has developed. In fact, liberalism has usually (if not always) been associated with Western and European civilisation(s). Still in the 1970s, in his influential, *The Ancient Economy*, the scholar of classical antiquity, Moses I. Finley, could claim that: "It is impossible to translate the word 'freedom', *eleutheria* in Greek, *libertas* in Latin, or 'free man', into any ancient Near Eastern language, including Hebrew, or into any Far Easter language either".[15]

Of course, notions such as freedom and liberty (so often and so misleadingly used as synonyms) are deeply rooted in ambiguous Eurocentric assumptions.[16] And yet it is undeniable that discourses about European identity and unity have often entwined with the history of liberal thought. So, for one, in a famous series of lectures held in Nazi-occupied Milan in 1943-1944, Federico Chabod wove his history of the idea of Europe, centring it on the intellectual dichotomy between Europe as the place of freedom and Asia as the place of despotism.[17] In doing so, he assigned a pivotal role to some of the main thinkers of the Age of the Enlightenment. However, and importantly for us, Chabod reminded his students that the first modern definition of Europe as the cradle of modern political freedom was to be found in Machiavelli's *Arte della Guerra*, a work written in 1521.[18] In the latter, the Florentine scholar and diplomat argued (all too misleadingly) that while Asia had always been united under vast empires and ruled by one man but where, because of this, there had been peace,

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12 Ryan 2007; Freeden *et al.* 2019.

13 Gallie 1955-1956.

14 Bedeschi 2015: 10.

15 Finley 1973: 28.

16 For an assessment of the semantic complexity see Pitkin 1988.

17 Chabod 1961: 19.

18 *Ibid.*: 48-54.

Europe had always been divided into several small states, principalities, dukedoms, and republics constantly at war with one another.[19] But, on the one hand, these polities were free and, on the other, freedom and the love of country that came with it nurtured valorous warriors – or so Machiavelli believed. Tellingly, in his works, freedom and struggle were indissolubly tied to one another. It is easy to see how this association became crucial, much later on, to liberalism itself. And how, in fact, Machiavelli's war was slowly replaced by economic competition, civic dissent, and dissonance of opinions. Indeed, one crucial aspect of nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberalism lay in the belief that discord and contrast between groups and individuals is, in and of itself, always conducive to social, economic, and cultural progress.[20] Struggle is a core element of liberalism. This can easily be seen in the history of liberalism itself as well as in the works of its forefathers. Struggle is intrinsic to Immanuel Kant's idea of competition, so beautifully captured in the image of the trees in a wood which, "each seeking to take the sunlight and the air from others, must strive upward, and thus each attains a beautiful, straight stature". It is in Alexis de Tocqueville's praise of American society, where one should not seek "uniformity and permanence of views" but, instead, "the image of force, a bit savage, it is true, but full of power; of life, accompanied by accidents but also by movements and efforts". It is in Luigi Einaudi's firm belief that "[o]nly through struggle, only by endless trying and experimenting, only through victories and defeats, does a society, a nation thrive".[21] If liberalism and, with it, progress are to thrive, then differences of opinions, beliefs, and interests must be safeguarded and pluralism cherished – all the while avoiding, of course, any recourse to violence.

When considering the point from a broader perspective, shifting the gaze towards the Old Continent and its nation-states, the notion that dissent and competition are the essence of freedom itself has often been associated with the idea of the balance of powers. In fact, as Ludwig Dehio wrote in the aftermath of the Second World War, "the free, sovereign and competing states of the European system have always agreed on one point only: that of avoiding the unification of the West under the hegemony of one of them and thus the loss of their sovereignty".[22] A very similar point had already been made by Emer de Vattel, in the mid-eighteenth century, when he argued that Europe was "a political system, an integral body,

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19 See Machiavelli 2017: 87-90. Also see Machiavelli 2022: 92-93.

20 Bedeschi 2015: 42-48.

21 Kant 1964: vi, 40; de Tocqueville 1981: I, 160; Einaudi 1974: 243.

22 Dehio, 1955: 111.

closely connected by the relations and different interests" prevailing in that part of the globe. This fact, he also noted, rendered modern Europe a kind of republic, of which the members, each independent but all linked together by the ties of common interest, unite for the maintenance of order and liberty. Hence arose that famous scheme of the political balance, or the equilibrium of power, a disposition of things in which no power is in a condition to predominate absolutely or prescribe laws to the others.

Even more interestingly, at around the same time more than one author discerned a close connection between the balance of powers, the shaping of modern freedom, and the sharing of common cultural elements between the nations of Europe. Such was the case with Voltaire, for whom the sharing of the same "religious foundation" and the same "principles of politics and public law" demanded that Europe's nations "act wisely" and maintain "a balance of power". For his part, Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that Europe formed a system that united its nations by means of a common religion, by the same laws, customs, letters, commerce, "and a sort of balance which is the necessary effect of all this".[23] Here, the balance of powers was not only a political ruse but also a cultural fact and the two, in fact, seemingly reinforced one another. The latter point was also caught later on, by the liberal activist and historian, Luigi Blanch who, pondering the history of Europe, claimed that for the balance of power to be successful, it "is necessary that all peoples have something in common" almost as if they were "members of the same family", so much so that differences would be a matter "of degree, rather than character".[24] Interestingly, much later on, Chabod took such arguments a step further. In fact, he noted, for centuries the balance of power had defended a specific 'moral value', that is, the 'uniqueness' of each and every one of the polities forming the European state system. The concept of balance came to stand as "the political symbol of the commonality of interests and traditions" and, as such, it made it possible "to speak of a European civilisation and to contrast Europe with the other parts of the world".[25]

Thus, the connection between liberalism and Europe is – and always has been – twofold. On the one hand, liberalism(s) historically developed as a distinct European notion. For liberal intellectuals and thinkers, the rest of the world, in particular Asia or the 'East', but also colonial spaces, often served as a negative 'other'. On the other hand, liberal ideas such as

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[23] Voltaire 1957: 620-621; Rousseau 1959: III, 565.

[24] Blanch 1945: III, 328.

[25] Chabod 1995: 13-14.

the notion of freedom allowed for specific ideas of Europe to emerge. At perhaps no other time in history was this more obvious than during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s when liberalism and Europeanism were much discussed in the resistance movements against Fascism and National Socialism.[26] This led to major debates on the relationship between nationalism and transnationalism on the one hand, and on that between freedom and other liberties on the other.[27] Thus, in 1932, in his *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce made the case that while the Age of Enlightenment had been characterised by an abstract form of individual liberty and a vague feeling of cosmopolitanism, the nineteenth century had been the age of national independence and of individual rights which, however imperfectly, could finally be enjoyed thanks to and within the nation-state. The next step, Croce ventured in his book, would be the overcoming of nationalism, which had now grown to be a threat to freedom itself, and the unification of Europe as the place where liberty would be properly safeguarded and where individual rights could be fully enjoyed. Written during Mussolini's dictatorship, this was an extraordinary (and perhaps even astonishing) vindication of freedom and a condemnation of nationalism. Yet Croce was only one among several writers who, in a Europe in which totalitarianism was on the rise and even seemed to many the only solution to the predicaments of a decadent civilisation, went against the current. In doing so, these authors were reaffirming a key strand among discourses about Europe, one that from Machiavelli to Montesquieu, from Constant to Cobden, and from Norman Angell to Luigi Einaudi, considered all forms of despotism to be against Europe's truest nature and all threats to liberty a temporary setback on a (more or less) inevitable path towards a united and free Europe.

The essays in this issue of the Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi analyse the development of European liberalism in the crucial, formative century between 1848 and the Second World War. They are all based on original research and provide fresh perspectives on a topic that has traditionally attracted a great deal of interest in European historiography but appears to have lost some ground recently with the new emphasis on the anti-liberal dimension of European intellectual history.[28] The essays are bound together by a number of similar approaches, research interests, and findings: firstly, in investigating British, French, German, Italian, as well as Spanish liberalism they emphasize the noteworthy national

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[26] Lipgens 1968, and, more recently, Belot and Preda 2022.

[27] On the relation between nationalism and liberalism in general see Leonhard 2023.

[28] Gosewinkel 2015.

differences in the history of liberal thought. Secondly, they point out the ambiguities and complexities in the history of liberalism. Especially in the nineteenth century the fight for freedom and individual liberties and against monarchical oppression led to a blurring of political boundaries. Thus, as can be seen in the contribution of Bernd Braun, socialists and social democrats such as Ernst Elsenhans in Baden were sometimes the most ardent supporters of liberal values. Indeed, the very essence of liberalism as a political world view was already in dispute back then – as were its demarcations from other ideologies. But in the twentieth century the history of European liberalism in a way became even more complex, as Giuseppe Sciara illustrates in his analysis of the reception of Benjamin Constant's classic liberal ideas within Italian anti-fascism. With the rise of the radical ideologies, intellectuals like Constant became liberal classics and 'useful tools' for contemporaries focused on the restoration of civil liberties and the relationship between freedom and democracy – though, as Sciara shows, it was precisely in this context that Constant's concept of 'the freedom of the moderns' was misunderstood by Croce and others.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, all contributions pay special attention to the role of transnational networks and transfers of knowledge within liberal circles. Already in 1848-1849 even a private teacher and journalist from Southern Germany such as Ernst Elsenhans, a person without much of an academic background, was well aware of the contemporary intellectual debates in France and quite spontaneously included the term 'world state system' in his political ideas, thereby revealing a surprising knowledge of the colonial situation in Latin America. Transnationalism proved to be a constitutive feature not only regarding the transfer of ideas, but also concerning the reasoning and argumentation of liberal thinkers. Paola Cattani investigates resemblances and contradictions in the political ideas of Thomas Mann, Paul Valéry, and José Ortega y Gasset and their changing assessments of democratic liberalism, especially the discovery of the importance of its ethical foundations. This was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the history of racial liberalism outlined in the article by Oded Steinberg: the invention of a Teutonic as well as an Anglo-Saxon model of racial supremacy by liberal intellectuals in the late Victorian era, and its inclusion in their worldview in this sense both marked a dark moment in liberal thought and also underlined one of its basic characteristics, namely, its internationalism. However, as Patricia Chiantera-Stutte emphasizes in her contribution, liberal internationalism in the age of nationalism and imperialism was far more complex and ambiguous than it might seem at first glance. In Great Britain, after the First World War, liberal intellectuals such as Gilbert Murray and Alfred E. Zimmern did not only focus on the emergence of new international

institutions like the League of Nations, but at the same time concerned themselves with reforming – and protecting – the British Empire and with re-establishing British hegemony in Europe and the wider world.

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