THOMAS MANN, PAUL VALÉRY, JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET AND DEMOCRATIC LIBERALISM. FROM CRITICISM TO DEFENCE, BETWEEN POLITICS AND ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

During the interwar period, a number of famous writers involved in the debate on the idea of Europe shifted from harsh criticism to passionate defence of democratic liberalism. Among others, the German novelist Thomas Mann passed from a vigorous offensive against the democratic West in the *Reflections of an Nonpolitical Men*, to the pro-democracy speech *The German Republic* held in 1922; the French poet Paul Valéry, despite his anti-democratic sentiments, became herald of liberal and democratic Europe since the early 1920s; and the Spanish writer José Ortega y Gasset, which addressed deep criticisms to mass-democracy in *The Revolt of Masses*, could finally claim for a renewed liberal democracy for Europe. How to explain such contradictory attitudes? What were the main criticisms moved against liberal democracy, and which arguments were put forward in its final defence? The paper presents the fundamental features of what those authors commonly referred to as 'moral' or 'spiritual' liberalism, and investigates its relationship to the anti-liberal tradition of the 19th century (from Maistre to Nietzsche).

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INTRODUCTION

In the years between the two World Wars, several famous writers who were important participants in the debate on the idea of Europe espoused some profoundly contradictory positions, ranging from sharp criticism of democratic liberalism to passionate defence of it. These writers include German novelist Thomas Mann, who vehemently criticized the West in 1918 in his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (Mann 2021) before proclaiming his commitment to the pro-democratic cause in his speech on *The German Republic* in 1922 (Mann 1974: 811-852); French poet Paul Valéry, who had made little secret of his antidemocratic and anti-Dreyfusard sentiments in the final years of the nineteenth century, before declaring himself in favour of a liberal and democratic Europe in his famous article *The Crisis of the Mind* published in 1919 (Valéry 2016: I, 695-710); and Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, who issued a stinging critique of mass democracy in *The Revolt of Masses* in 1930 (Ortega y Gasset 2021), but also made a significant contribution to the creation of democratic Spain, even becoming a deputy in the constituent assembly of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931.[1]

Certainly these authors' attitudes towards democratic liberalism changed in line with the developments in the historical and political situation; the advance of totalitarianisms inevitably led them to reassess some of the unquestionably positive aspects of the social and political system they had criticized so harshly to begin with. However, it would be wrong to suggest that such profound and enduring contradictions were merely a natural and gradual development through successive and distinct moments in chronological time. Fundamentally these authors believed that the synthesis between liberalism and democracy attempted at the end of the nineteenth century had failed, and that in-depth reassessment was required urgently as a result. What aspects did they criticize, and what form did their defence take? In what measure did the robust anti-democratic and anti-liberal tradition of the literary late nineteenth century shape and condition these writers' concerns, and to what degree did they depart from it (if indeed they did)? This paper will seek to answer these questions, with a view to identifying which directions the reassessment of liberalism and democracy took in the authors discussed. We have decided to focus on authors who, in their perspective as writers and philosophers rather than political scientists, offer a high, literary-cultural vantage point on the transformations of democratic liberalism that were also so

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[1] Cf. GRAY 1989.

vibrantly debated in the same years in a more properly theoretical-political context. Their trajectories and reconsiderations prove paradigmatic insofar as, although developed in different geographical-linguistic contexts, they converge on certain important nodes. We will limit ourselves here, for the purposes of this article, to highlighting and examining these convergences, postponing to a future occasion the analysis of the actual human relations and intellectual dialogues that linked the authors themselves.

Before proceeding to the analysis, a brief note on terminology is necessary. The expression 'democratic liberalism' should be preferred to the expression 'liberal democracy' to refer to the social and political model discussed by these authors in the early twentieth century. It is true that the ideal pursued by liberal democracy, both politically and socially, and in terms of morality, of both society and human beings, was precisely what was being debated so fiercely at the start of the new century. However, liberal democracy only emerged fully, as both a historical and theoretical phenomenon, after 1945, when for many countries in Western Europe it came to represent the response to the tragedies and struggles of the first half of the century.[2] Throughout the whole nineteenth century, in the wake of classical Aristotelian thought, and coming so soon after the French Revolution, liberal democracy as such was inconceivable. (More thought was given to the question of how to manage a naturally illiberal democracy, as with Tocqueville.) Even after the term itself appeared for the first time in 1863, in a work by French historian and politician Charles de Montalembert, an opponent of Napoleon III's plebiscitary and illiberal democracy (Montalembert 2006), for a long time it was more aspiration than description, even in the English-speaking world, where the efforts of Abraham Lincoln in the United States and William Gladstone in the United Kingdom were significant turning points in the relationship between liberalism and democracy.[3] Very rarely does the expression appear in the texts of the authors under consideration in this paper, who were less interested in the possibilities of implementing liberal democracy in political and institutional terms (unlike the prolific journalistic output of the time on this subject, which explored the social and political crisis of liberalism and democracy in great depth),[4] and more in the values

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[2] Even though some scholars situate the birth of liberal democracy (and hence the watershed between utopian and liberal democracy) at the start of the nineteenth century, when certain authors understood the principle of 'one man, one vote'; cf. MACPHERSON 1977: 12.

[3] Cf. ROSENBLATT 2018: 156-193.

[4] On the theme of the crisis of liberalism and democracy, cf. among others NEWMAN 1970, MAZOWER 1998, GAUCHET 2007, MÜLLER 2011. Among the numerous publications of the time on the crisis of liberalism, see: DAL MONTE 1887, LESPINASSE FONSEGRIVE 1899, LAVELEYE 1883,

and assumptions underpinning democratic and liberal ideals, jointly and respectively.

Though there were areas of agreement – even profound agreement, as we shall see – between the three authors discussed here, each of them concentrated on different problematic aspects of the version of democratic liberalism that the late nineteenth century handed down to the twentieth.

1. THOMAS MANN, WITH AND BEYOND NIETZSCHE

Thomas Mann, in his virulent work *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* – a book which the author himself did not regard without suspicion or concern, describing it as "monstrous", having consumed all his energies for three long years, from 1915 to 1918 – provided a searing indictment of current European politics which in his view was dominated by two main tendencies, both equally disastrous: English utilitarian/pragmatic liberalism, and French revolutionary democratism. For Mann, both the strong and the weak point of English liberalism was its empirical nature, being geared towards meeting concrete needs ("And quite a few practically useful things that make life more agreeable come from there, such as the bicycle, the water closet, the trimmed moustache, the safety razor, lawn tennis, and so on and so on", Mann 2021: 357); whereas in France, the democratic revolution was inextricably linked to the heinous reversal that was the bloody and illiberal Reign of Terror. Both these models of civilization – Mann dismissively uses the term *Civilisation*, of French and Enlightenment origin, in opposition to the German *Kultur* – were seeking to achieve the wrong type of freedom as far as he was concerned. Focusing on the institutional and political dimension of collective life in this way was for him profoundly damaging to the original and more valuable spiritual and individual freedom, which in his eyes must be defended at all costs. The "barren – abstract [institutions] of the political West and of 'human rights'" (*ibid*.: 229) were not a suitable foundation on which to build an authentically free society or individuals. This is where the idea of the "non-political" comes from, a term which Mann uses not as the opposite of politics (in the sense of 'anti-political'), but to indicate a pole of resistance against the increasing politicization of public and intellectual discourse. To be more accurate, Mann conceived both the category of the "non-political" and the civilization/culture opposition as tools with

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HOBSON 1909, DE RUGGIERO 2003 [1925], SCHNABEL 1933, LASKI 1936. On the crisis of democracy, see, for example, BONN 1925, GIRAUD 1925, BARTHÉLEMY 1931, PERCY 1931, RAPPARD 1938.

which to refute the political and aesthetic positions held by his brother Heinrich, who politically in those years was starting to assume radically pacifist positions, and in literature was looking to Zola as a model of an *engagé* intellectual defending democracy and the people (H. Mann 1994). Against this kind of radicalism, Thomas Mann argued that the artist should maintain a kind of "irreverent amorality", presenting him as an "aesthete" or a "nonpolitical human being" (*ibid.*: 123). Seeing that politics is so often inhuman, humanity, in all its depth and to its furthest reach, becomes the responsibility of art and the artist. Mann's version of the non-political is therefore not opposed so much to politics itself as to politicization, in the sense of the totalizing and pervasive phenomenon that conquers peoples and artists, history and culture. Mann specifies that the "German burgher" (a model which he idealized) "will never learn to believe that the state is the purpose and meaning of human existence, that the destiny of the human being is found in the state, and that politics makes people more human" (*ibid.*: 112). Mann's non-political is therefore more opposed to Rousseau's conception of the political, which pervades the whole of life, than to Aristotle's: for him politics occupies an important part of life, but cannot lay claim to all human existence, which has higher callings that are spiritual and moral, and are independent of and antecedent to politics.

Mann's criticisms and perspective are generally described as conservative (critics indeed speak of 'spiritual conservatism').[5] However, it would be more appropriate to describe his stance as anti-modern, for it is concerned less with preserving the status quo than with opposing a modernity which he viewed with suspicion. Rather than at the opposite pole of progressivism, we find Mann in what we might call a zone of reluctance, that coincides with critical enquiry which in places is radical. Indeed, Mann belongs properly to the heterogeneous, well-populated tradition of anti-modernism that extends back as far as De Maistre and forwards to Barthes, from the counterrevolutionaries to the critics of consumerist society.[6] Mann's criticisms of liberal and democratic freedom effectively mirror the arguments and phrasing of nineteenth-century anti-liberalism. It was Nietzsche in particular, cited explicitly by Mann, who provided him with his battery of anti-democratic imagery and arguments, and who mediated this tradition to him. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche had contrasted "free, very free spirits" (among whom he included himself) with "these misnamed 'free spirits'", whom he described as "eloquent and prolifically scribbling slaves

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[5] Cf. Alessiato 2011; on Mann, see also Fechner 1990, Mehring 2001, Robertson 2002, Görtemaker 2005, Crescenzi 2006.

[6] Cf. Compagnon 2016.

of the democratic taste and its 'modern ideas'", and whose democratic ideal of freedom, founded on equal rights and compassion for all who were suffering, coincided with "the universal, green pasture happiness of the herd, with security, safety, contentment, and easier life for all" (Nietzsche 2002: 25-42). As is well known, for Nietzsche the democratic movement had followed Christianity in devising a "herd-like" morality, for the weak. True freedom, by contrast, is that of the superior, heroic individual who blazes a trail so that all values can be rejected. His third *Untimely Meditation* takes Schopenhauer as an historical illustration of the type of individual who is capable of superior liberty: the model of man described by Nietzsche is the opposite of Rousseau's active man, who is always in danger of degenerating into a Catiline, and of the contemplative man, who runs the risk of becoming a "Philistine", locked into sterile conservativism (as happened to Goethe, according to Nietzsche). The Nietzschean *Übermensch* is therefore construed as the opposite of the man of the herd, who makes no effort to struggle against his own nature. Unlike him, the *Übermensch* desires to recreate humanity from himself, and from there, to attain to the highest spiritualization possible.[7] From this perspective, nothing could be further removed from authentic freedom than liberalism and the liberal institutions, which for Nietzsche acted rather to annihilate the struggle and pacify the vital instincts.

The sharp critique of democratic liberal society formulated by Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century had a profound and enduring influence on the debate at the start of the twentieth. Carl Schmitt reaffirmed its main points when he denounced the weakness and surrender of liberalism, which he saw as a defeatist philosophy that preferred pacifism to conflict and was incapable of passion and intensity, because it entailed a degree of inert passivity.[8] Different readings of Nietzsche were proposed in the early twentieth century, several of which in contradiction to each other. For our purposes, we shall merely note that his passionate and incendiary critique of democratic liberal society may, from a certain time on, have been considered no longer entirely satisfactory.

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[7] Cf. Kessler 2006; Gori and Stellino 2016; Astor 2017. On Mann and Nietzsche, see Hennis 1987.

[8] In *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Holmes 1993) the American scholar Stephen Holmes presents Nietzsche and de Maistre as two of the guardian angels of anti-liberalism, defined as a trend that transcends history: two authors who are, and whose starting points in particular are, very different from each other (where Nietzsche argues for a more radical liberalism, de Maistre denies its value, arguing that it inspires a dangerous ethos in terms of opposition to authority and power, and a selfish drive that undermines civil society; where Nietzsche does away with God, de Maistre is a Catholic, committed to reiterating a providentialist view of history), but who use several of the main arguments rehearsed by anti-liberals and anti-democrats repeatedly in the course of the twentieth century.

Indeed, although the *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* unmistakably bear the influence of Nietzsche, they also show Mann starting to distance himself from some of the more destructive aspects of his criticisms. In his *Prologue*, Mann notes that there are two ways in which Nietzsche's legacy can be interpreted: either one can choose to insist on its "ruthless Renaissance aestheticism", that is, to lend credence to the "hysterical cult of power, beauty, and life"; or alternatively, one can take the route of irony as a constructive form of negation, which is capable of denying and supporting the cause of the spirit simultaneously (Mann 2021: 19). Mann is well aware that the dark side of freedom is "completely limitless", and that freedom is a "nihilistic idea and therefore only salutary in the smallest doses", "a medicinal poison" (*ibid.*: 427); it has to be considered more as "a road, not a goal already reached; which means openness, flexibility, inclination towards life, humility" (*ibid.*: 444). In 1922, in his famous speech on *The German Republic* which marked his anguished conversion from critic to defender of democracy (without recanting his previous position), Mann himself wondered whether his extreme defence of spiritual freedom might not have served the opposite cause (Mann 1974: 811-852). A few years later, feeling the need to halt the erosion of the values on which European culture was based, in his famous pro-European speech of 1935 *Achtung, Europa!* Mann explains that democracy, in its liberal version, is to be defended because it is based, more than any other political form, on the sentiment and awareness of the "dignity" of man (Mann 1938). As for Nietzsche, Mann was to give his opinion at length in an article published at the end of the 1940s, in which he warned that "anyone who takes Nietzsche 'at face value', literally, anyone who believes in him, is lost" (Mann 1948: 149-156).

Mann was not alone in his reassessment of the destructive nature of Nietzsche's contribution. In France, one of the authors most cautious on Nietzsche was Paul Valéry, who had devoured the philosopher's works avidly when they were first translated into French, in 1898-1900, but at the same time was highly sceptical of its explosive nature, which he saw as being unsatisfactory in its *pars construens*.[9]

2. Paul Valéry and the disorder of modernity

In the article that established his place as an authoritative thinker on the idea of Europe, *The Crisis of the Mind* published in 1919, Valéry was especially critical of the state of confusion reigning in European culture at

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[9] Cf. Valéry 2017.

the time, which he compared to an incandescent furnace in which nothing could be distinguished, "an infinitely potential nothing":

The physicists tell us that if the eye could survive in an oven fired to the point of incandescence, it would see.. nothing. There would be no unequal intensities of light left to mark off points in space. That formidable contained energy would produce invisibility, indistinct equality. Now, equality of that kind is nothing else than a perfect state of *disorder*. And what made that disorder in the mind of Europe? The free coexistence, in all her cultivated minds, of the most dissimilar ideas, the most contradictory principles of life and learning. That is characteristic of a *modern* epoch (Valéry 1962: 27).

Robert Musil observed something similar in the same years when he described Europe as "a Babylonian madhouse" (Musil 1922). For Musil too, it was the heterogeneous and cacophonous muddle of beliefs and opinions into which Europe had been thrown that was the issue, and to express the profound disgust that this chaos provoked in him, he used another strong image, that of Europe as an "upset stomach [that] vomits up the same ill-digested meal in thousands of different pieces". Neither Valéry nor Musil believed that the solution was a return to order, for they were both aware of the danger this entailed – Valéry notes that "Extreme order, which is automatism, would be its [Europe's] ruin" (Valéry 1962: 314). The metaphors of the incandescent fire and the madhouse serve primarily to describe the state of confusion that reigned in Europe as a result of the liberal model failing. Both Valéry and Musil were reflecting on the fragility of the liberal mechanism, which is predicated on variety, a positive form of uncontrolled disorder, that is able to cultivate plurality and heterogeneity.

Valéry in fact saw a close, positive link between disorder and modernity: freedom of expression, the coexistence of opposites, are part of what makes up the modern world and indeed marked its birth, and are intimately bound up with it. Modern liberal philosophy had made variety its byword, linking new society inextricably to a positive form of uncontrolled disorder, which cultivates pluralism, the co-existence of the heterogeneous, and tolerance, as the breeding ground for potential and the future, Valéry repeatedly uses the image of the market as an allegory for modern European civilization, a place where all sorts of commodities, beliefs and ideas coming from all kinds of locations are compared and exchanged. Europe, indeed, is a "lively market", in which this heterogeneous mix that is enriched continually and without limitation is somehow miraculously orchestrated, harmonized, and regulated:

It [Europe] was an Exchange where the great varieties of doctrines, ideas, discoveries and dogmes were *floated*, and *quoted*, and rose or fell, and were the object of the most pitiless criticism and the blindest infatuation (Valéry 1962: 313).

If the disorder has become intolerable, it is because something has gone wrong with the pricing and orchestration mechanisms, and an anarchic, unprofitable and sterile disorder has taken the place of the positive one, in which variety was a source of wealth.

In this sense, Valéry's critique of liberal Europe (and Musil's, for that matter) was very different from those formulated by authors before him such as Joseph de Maistre, and after him, such as Carl Schmitt, against the relativism and scepticism which in their view were closely linked to liberal thought. Whereas these thinkers believed liberalism to be problematic and dangerous, because it was fundamentally hostile to the classical idea of the objective good, Valéry viewed the absence of an ordering centre with relief, and was concerned rather with the fragility of the general mechanism. It was the "Mind" ("Esprit", or thought, or the intellect) which in his view should govern the process of mediation, without causing dispersion.

Thought for Valéry is the force that enables the paradoxical movement from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous to take place. He uses the image of a jug containing a mixture of water and wine, in which the drops of red wine separate out from the solution and become visible once again:

A drop of wine falling into water barely colors it and tends to disappear after showing as a pink cloud. That is the physical fact. But suppose now that some time after it has vanished, gone back to limpidity, we should see here and there in our glass – which seemed once more to hold *pure* water – drops of wine forming dark and *pure* – what a surprise! This phenomenon of Cana is not impossible in intellectual and social physics. We so speak of *genius* and contrast it with diffusion (Valéry 1962: 36).

Thought is even able to make what is weaker in quantitative terms stronger; that is, to cause the scales to tip down on the lighter side, "And so the scales that used to tip in our favour, although we *appear* the lighter, are beginning to lift us gently, as thought we had stupidly shifted to the other side the mysterious excess that was ours" (Valéry 1962: 35). Thus thought is a force that can guarantee a productive kind of inequality: it accentuates variety, disrupts and disturbs the established order, and, in producing movement, creates value. For Valéry the concept of inequality is fundamental: not because he desired an unequal – in the sense of an unjust – society, but because he wanted to live in a society that rewards value (the value of products, people, and ideas) and which is based on value. Thought also prevents such productive variety from becoming

merely a "carnival", a gratuitous celebration of diversity as no more than
a hotchpotch plurality. If thought abdicates its role for whatever reason, as
it had done in recent years, during World War I in particular, the wealth
of variety is transformed into an unbearable mess, or into complete stasis,
which is tantamount to the same thing. Thought for Valéry is therefore
the instrument of, and precondition to, our liberty: a society founded on
liberty can function for as long as the precondition for managing it, namely
the use of the faculty of thought, continues to be met.

It is in this context that Valéry's controversial comments on Europe's
loss of prestige should be interpreted. For Valéry the problem was not so
much that Europe was losing its position of supremacy, rather the large-
scale paradigm shift he believed was taking place in the world in which
he was living: a shift from the reign of thought and the value it adds, to
the tyranny of brutal numerical logic, the force of numbers and majorities
(whereby Europe was destined to become what it was in reality, namely
a "little promontory on the continent of Asia", Valéry 1962: 31). Valéry
saw freedom as a liberal ideal that was being threatened by freedom as a
democratic ideal. This does not mean he was hostile to democracy, rather
that he was asking how to safeguard the precious, indispensable value
offered by individual originality within democracies.[10]

Faced with liberal Europe's economic and social weaknesses, then,
Valéry goes much further than merely noting the crisis and failure of
liberalism. Rather, he urges the continent to start again, paradoxically
enough, from the concept of liberal philosophy itself. What he advocates is
a new, spiritual form of liberalism, one that is able to safeguard and indeed
renew the authentic, original instincts of the liberal tradition, which is
valuable precisely because it is geared towards ensuring that individuals
have an opportunity to develop their originality to the fullest potential. For
Valéry, the individual is the most valuable thing of all, both in absolute terms
and within society, but was being strongly and dangerously threatened
by the storms that dominated the interwar period, at a time when the
individual and its resources had been devalued (a period which culturally
and politically speaking was focused strongly on the masses, having been
culturally seduced by quantitative considerations, which in general terms
was keen to shed the excesses of a liberal individualism that had displayed
all its negative consequences).

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[10] On the political ideas of Valéry, cf. VALÉRY 2020.

3. José Ortega y Gasset and the Self-destructive Liberalism

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset was also wrestling with similar problems. To understand the criticisms that Ortega levelled against democratic liberalism, it is necessary to begin with discussion of some of his writings from the early twentieth century, when he was starting to reflect on the weaknesses of contemporary Spanish and European society. The first rebuke he addressed to liberalism was the fact that, having started out as a revolutionary ideal, it had come to resemble a conservative philosophy, because the liberals had not changed with the times, and remained anchored to specific historical incarnations of the idea of freedom. According to Ortega, liberty is often mistakenly reduced to mere tolerance, whereas in fact "it is a divine mythological name which we use in order to realize that constitutions are always unjust, and that it is our duty to reform them" (Ortega y Gasset 1908). "The question of life as freedom is therefore more profound and serious that the question of this or that liberty", he wrote, because

there is no liberty that circumstances cannot one day render materially impossible; but a liberty being cancelled for material reasons does not lead to us feeling constrained in our free condition. On the contrary, dimensions of life in which hitherto people have been unable to be free will one day enter the liberation zone, and certain freedoms which concerned people so much during the nineteenth century will not bother them at all as time progresses […] (Ortega y Gasset 1941: 1003-1004).

The nineteenth century had been insolent and blind in imposing certain limited ideas of freedom, and so monopolizing the very idea of freedom.

Ortega's analysis is consistent with that of the US philosopher John Dewey, who, in his *Liberalism and Social Action* (Dewey 1935), noted how the beliefs and methods of the first liberalism (that of *laissez faire*) had proved to be ineffective in tackling the new problems of social organization engendered by its success, and had lost their original meaning without leading to innovation and change. For Dewey, a resurgent liberalism had to address the problem of realizing liberty more seriously and profoundly, going beyond the reductive conflict between government and individual liberty, and must ask in particular how to build a social order in which individual forces are not only released from external ones, but can also be nourished and strengthened.

For Ortega too, liberalism was to be reconceived as a frontline ethical imperative, always ahead of the game, scouting out new liberties. It was to be redefined as a form of "political thought that puts the realization of

a moral idea ahead of mere utility" (Ortega y Gasset 1908), a vision that was the exact opposite of utilitarian liberalism (which too had emerged from an important nineteenth-century liberal tradition), and coincided with the eternal warning of moral law, that condemns every stagnation of the written law.

Later on, Ortega focused his attention with increasing concern on some of the shadows cast by the democratic-liberal system, which to his eyes seemed to be intimately and damnably self-destructive. Democracy in his view was inclined to degenerate into "plebeismo": for him, anyone who, however justifiably irritated they might be at seeing equals treated differently, is at the same time untroubled by seeing those who are different being treated the same, is a plebeian rather than a democrat:

And if previously I said that it is not legitimate to be 'primarily' democratic, now I would add that it is not legitimate to be 'only' democratic either. Anyone who is a friend of justice cannot stop at simply levelling up privileges, at guaranteeing equal rights for what is equal among people. They will feel the same urgency to make laws, to legitimize, all that is unequal or different between people too (Ortega y Gasset 1917).

Both, in other words, were equally serious issues for Ortega: the injustice of inequality, and the casual lumping together of differences. From as early as *Invertebrate Spain* (Ortega y Gasset 1921), he was highlighting the issue in contemporary Spain of the absence of minorities, which are vital for that part of the life of the collective that is unable to model itself on the majority. He also deals with the issue at length in the *Revolt of the Masses*, emphasizing what he calls the risk of hyper-democracy. For Ortega liberalism could bring valuable correction to democracy. With its regard for individual diversities, it argues for respect and recognition to be given to minorities, and represents a safeguard against indiscriminate levelling up.[11]

Conversely, while one cannot live without freedom, it is also true that one cannot live off freedom alone. Ortega interpreted liberalism more as a curtailing of power than as the notion of freedom itself. As he explained in an article on Tocqueville and the democratic pressures of his day,

The great motivation in those years was to be able to live in a society where people felt free, which in concrete terms meant that individuals found they were able exist in certain important areas of their own activity, starting from their own, very personal identity, in accordance with what they felt to be their individual

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[11] On the political thinking of Ortega y Gasset, see among others Savignano 1996; Dobson 2009. Translations of the quotes from Ortega are mine.

inspiration or calling. To see this premise of freedom, as it was perceived in those days, as merely a desire for revolt is therefore to willfully misunderstand it (Ortega y Gasset 1960).

According to a distinction advocated by several thinkers in the latter half of the twentieth century, including Norberto Bobbio, the democratic ideal answers the question of who holds power, while the liberal ideal defines how much power those in power are actually able to have (Bobbio 2006). For Ortega, power must limit itself, for example by protecting minorities; so direct political action by the masses, without mediation or limitation, would be a major step backwards for collective life and a threat to civilization itself. Ortega, like Valéry, in his political essays asks whether the conditions for increasing the likelihood of discovering authentically free ways of living can be found in democratic societies; which is to say, how power can be extended and curtailed at the same time.

Democratic liberalism as far as Ortega is concerned is therefore self-destructive when it forgets and neglects the fragile compromise on which it is predicated, which requires it to meet the dual needs of a just society (that is to recognize not only constitutional equality, but also the real diversity and specificity of individuals). The problem at the heart of the *Revolt of the Masses* is not so much, or not only, the ascent to power of the masses who are disrespectful of minorities, but also the fact that such masses are, tragically, the product of liberalism itself. The nineteenth century, with its excesses and fundamentalism, had produced men of the masses who were "revolting" in the sense that they were jeopardizing the very principles to which they owed their lives (Ortega y Gasset 2021: 84-85). It should be noted that these same reflections by Ortega were the starting point for Thomas Mann in his *Achtung, Europa!*, the emotional appeal he addressed to Europeans in 1935. For Mann, a licentious intoxication had taken hold of Europe, because liberty had come to be understood as a release from morality and rationality. For him this attitude was rooted in the contradictions of nineteenth-century liberalism, which had produced masses who were capable of "trampling on, or rather, exploiting liberal democracy in order to destroy it", and who were disrespectful of the complex and delicate premises on which it had been founded (Mann 1938: 87). The main antidote to these self-destructive tendencies of nineteenth-century liberalism was to direct liberty and liberalism back towards a more spiritual, original and radical understanding of the terms.

4. Moral liberalism

The three authors considered here are therefore all strongly critical of democratic liberalism but for different reasons. For Mann, it promoted a type of freedom that was not sufficiently radical or spiritual; for Valéry, the problem lay more in the ease with which an anti-intellectualist democratic liberal era was happy to abandon "thought"; while for Ortega, democratic liberalism was based on a type of freedom that was too close to licentiousness, that had betrayed its own founding principles. Behind these various criticisms, however, a common objective emerges: to strike a delicate balance between freedom in the negative sense (the freedom to cultivate and realize one's own individualism), and freedom in the positive sense (of participating in the government of the collective, a principle now seen as non-negotiable); between freedom as self-realization, and freedom as self-government, both of which must be guaranteed by modern society. Mann, Valéry and Ortega were certainly influenced by the nineteenth-century anti-modernist cultural tradition (as described in Compagnon 2016), but they also distanced themselves both from nineteenth-century anti-democracy – for them democracy was not only unarguable, it was vital in order to preserve human dignity – and anti-liberalism, both the Nietzschean version (which for them was too destructive) and the Maistrean version (with whose anti-scepticism they disagreed).

However, above and beyond the difficult compromise between liberal and democratic freedom, the most important point is that all three authors considered here reinterpreted democratic liberalism in spiritual terms. For Valéry, it was only by starting again from the "spirit" that the concept of democratic liberalism, which had so much to commend it, could be revitalized, and the stock market of values, open to the contributions of all, which is what European culture should be, could be relaunched. For Ortega liberalism had had its time, and required replacing: not, however, with anti-liberalism (which he associated with both fascism and bolshevism), but with a more profound version of liberalism itself, one which transcended politics and entered the realm of individual and collective ethics. Mann, too, even before his democratic 'turn', reappraised liberal democracy as a virtue of the spirit: it should be primarily a "moral", not political force, an anachronistic virtue in a world that tended to destroy all of them (Mann 2021: 213).

In other words, all these authors recognized that the only way out of the continent's historical and political distortions, in which illiberal and conflictual attitudes were increasingly prevailing, was to re-envision liberalism as a form of mental and behavioural conduct. Democratic

liberalism was the correct approach, then, but primarily as an ethical stance. It was necessary to go back to liberalism's original, constituent meaning, which predated its disappointing historical manifestations. This unexpected and seemingly paradoxical solution of a returning to liberty in its original and spiritual sense in order to heal liberalism, both historical and political, is common also to other illustrious thinkers of the interwar period, notably Benedetto Croce, who, in his *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century* identifies Europe's motionless engine with its "religion of liberty":

Now he who gathers together and considers all these characteristics of the liberal ideal does not hesitate to call it what it was: a 'religion'. He calls it so, of course, because he looks for what is essential and intrinsic in every religion, which always lies in the concept of reality and an ethics that conforms to the concept (Croce 1963: 18).

Croce presents the crisis of liberalism as having been generated by the clash between concepts that were still valid and new forces, and affirmed that it was urgently necessary to return to the original, spiritual philosophy of liberty, one which is above all a way of understanding the world, a lesson in intellectual open-mindedness and respect for other people and their ideas:

[…] that period which has been described as one of departure from the liberal concepts can be understood only as the struggle of those concepts with the new events and the momentous developments which these concepts were called upon to dominate. […] However, throughout these contrasts, these difficulties, these exaggerations and these vociferations, the principle governing the history of the age we are treating is always the liberal principle, because no other has arisen or shown constructive strength (Croce 1945: 139, 142).

It is worth emphasizing some of the main points which the reflections on 'spiritual' or 'moral liberalism' made by the writers mentioned above were in agreement. Mann, Valéry and Ortega (and Croce too) all concur in sounding the same, anguished warning. If the freedom of the individual, in its original and moral sense, is not defended, all that remains on the horizon is "the miracle of an animal society, the perfect and ultimate anthill" (Valéry 2016: 704). Human society was running the risk, and imminently, of relapsing into "the life of the beast", as Croce again noted (Croce 1963: 353), and never had the realization of this been so strong – "Having persuaded ourselves that everything is possible, we now feel that even the worst is possible: turning back, barbarism, decadence" (Ortega y Gasset 2021: 24).

To find a way out of this impasse, Mann, Valéry and Ortega (and Croce too) returned to and revived the tradition of the "moralist liberals",[12] in particular those of the first phase of French liberalism (Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant), who saw the philosophy of liberty not only as a political project in opposition to authoritarianism, but also and in particular as a moral and practical cause with self-improvement as its main goal. More radically, these early nineteenth-century writers reconceptualized freedom and liberalism starting from the adjective 'liberal', which from ancient times and for centuries since then, has denoted an ethical attitude, consisting of generosity and open-mindedness, more than an economic and political ideal. To some extent they in fact interpreted the adjective 'liberal' in opposition to the noun 'liberalism', terms which, far from overlapping, can thrive in opposition to each other; and ended up trying to reconcile modern liberalism and classical liberality.

The adjective 'liberal' in Aristotle refers primarily to what is "worthy of a free man": it refers in particular to education, identifying those courses of study that teach a person not how to practise a trade but how to exercise his *otium* (in Greek *skolé*, or 'free time', we might say now), that is, how to make good use of his freedom. We find this sense of the word used in the expression 'liberal arts', still common in the English-speaking world to refer to the humanities subjects. 'Liberal' for Aristotle is also a way to describe someone who knows how to spend their money, distinguished equally from parsimony and prodigality. In the sense of 'generosity' the term is also found in the Roman Stoics, in Cicero and Seneca, and in medieval French literature, where *largesse* represents one of the ethical and practical ideas of the courtly knight.[13] It is only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that the term 'liberal' came to be used in a political context for the first time (in the United States first of all, by George Washington, who in the 1780s said what he wanted for the country was a "wide and liberal" government and a "liberal system of policy", Washington 1988: 242, 247); and later in Spain, France and Great Britain, where it came to refer to what are now called progressives, that is, in order, the Spanish politicians who admired French Revolution (as opposed to the "servile" followers of the monarchy), the French who were opposed to Napoleon's regime, and the English Whigs.[14]

The point is not so much to backdate the birth of liberalism, or to follow Leo Strauss in discussing "ancient liberalism" (Strauss 1995 [1968]);

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[12] Cf. H. ROSENBLATT 2018: 4; NEMO and PETITOT 2006; BIZIOU 2010; AUDARD 2009.

[13] Cf. LE JALLÉ and MCINTOSH-VARJABÉDIAN 2018.

[14] For the history and meanings of the noun, cf. LEONHARD 2001.

rather to focus attention on the fact that the term 'liberal' belongs to the vocabulary of moral philosophy as much as it does to that of political and economic philosophy. This dual referentiality means the concept of liberalism applies equally to the individual/ethical and the public/social (and hence also political and economic) spheres. This is why reflection on the liberal nature of democracy was so crucial for many writers at the start of the twentieth century. To enquire as to whether and how democracy could become, and could be, 'liberal', for them was to ask a question that was not so much, or rather, not primarily, political, but first and foremost ethical: that is, it was to pose a question regarding individual and social as well as public and institutional life, and to discuss a philosophical and literary theme with a long history, rather than a contemporary economic or political theory.

It is no coincidence that all the authors discussed in this essay rejected the primacy of politics: not of the political, in the etymological sense of 'that which pertains to the *polis*', in which they were all keenly interested; but rather, of politics in the all-embracing sense, which imposes its dynamics of mediation and realism on all that surrounds it, which they saw as being subordinate to a spiritual and ideal reflection that should precede and inform politics. Dozens of references from the works of Thomas Mann and Paul Valéry could be cited in this connection, both of whom were highly critical of the centrality of politics in the world in which they lived. Writers such as Mann, Valéry and Ortega were committed to reminding their readers that the spiritual and ideal must guide and direct the everyday life of the *polis*. Mann's declaration of war on the political hidden within the non-political, Valéry's concern over the state of "thought" (which is responsible for the smooth functioning of democratic liberal society), and Ortega's exhortation to rediscover the fundamentally revolutionary nature of liberalism, are all attempts to reunite the political and the spiritual, and to emphasize the importance of the spiritual and ethical dimension of politics, without which politics itself is lost.

These authors thus discovered that the fundamental problems of liberal and democratic societies cannot be solved by political and institutional engineering, or at the jurisdictional level by making new laws, however detailed or stringent these may be, but only by promoting the adoption and spread of habits and mental behaviours. In short, they emphasised that liberalism and democracy cannot ignore ethics. In pointing the way to a democratic liberalism that is primarily ethical and spiritual, these early twentieth-century writers in many ways pre-empted an important trend (to which they would doubtless have been sympathetic) in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century debate on this subject, when authors such as Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen and Ronald Dworkin have sought

to explore the ethical and philosophical foundations of political liberalism, and to rethink certain key notions of liberal thought from a more ethical perspective.

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