

Languages of European Liberalisms: Comparisons, Encounters and Transfers

An International Conference, Oxford 17th-18th June 2011

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Liberalism is one of the most pervasive of European ideologies, with a pedigree stretching back 200 years, and antecedents that are far older. It presents itself more specifically as a series of liberalisms in a family resemblance pattern and it has demonstrated extraordinary resilience and ideational power. In some European societies it is misrecognized, and some of its features appear under different labels, such as French solidarisme. In others it is marginalized. Its variants are crucially divided into a more spatial liberalism, which emphasises constitutionalism, the protection of areas of individual liberty, and checks and balances on power; and a more developmental liberalism that emphasises human progress, individuality and the promotion of human well-being, often by means of the state. In each of these two, the distinguishing characteristics of the other are discernible in a minor key. In addition, some of its economic versions have overshadowed its political and philosophical variants, and the borderline between liberalism and libertarianism has created confusion.

The intellectual history of Europe is closely intertwined with both the successes and failures of liberalism as a system of ideas and as a political movement. It is not only that the liberal tradition has been an inspiration to liberation movements across Europe; that it has directed the rule of law and identified the individual as the focus of political attention, but that the complexity of European ideological systems has seen liberal ideas cut across other political traditions, from conservatism to socialism. In addition, anti-liberalism of many kinds has been a motive force in European history that cannot be understood without appreciating the ideas against which it has reacted. The future of Europe and its institutions is heavily committed to exploring and advancing themes central to many liberal varieties.

Conceptual history has a triple role in the analysis of this topic. The first is to see the evolving meanings both of liberalism as an umbrella concept and of the main conceptual components of liberalism, such as liberty, individuality, progress, ac-

countable power, and the like, which appear in different internal combinations. The second is to examine the interactions among liberalism and related concepts external to it, and against which it continuously reformulates itself. The third is to associate conceptual history with the morphology of ideologies and to explore also the diachronic interrelationship among the field of concepts on which we focus, an interrelationship that is in constant flux due to the intervention of cultural and contingent factors. The project seeks to make progress in the comparative historical analysis of European liberalisms, especially by shedding light on the historical process of semantic construction of the ideological – but also political, historiographic and conceptual– object generically labelled ‘European Liberalism’. In so doing it will employ a multiplicity of methodologies that the different chapters will bring to bear in the topic, thus ensuring the intellectual cutting-edge quality of the volume. The approach to be adopted will cover three levels of analysis: lexicographic, semantic and rhetorical and be sensitive to both overlaps and national and regional differences in the development and ideational experience of liberalism.

The time frame will commence around 1800, and we are still open as to whether it will conclude in the mid-twentieth century or proceed to include some of the more recent changes in Eastern Europe. An appreciation of the fluidity and indeterminacy of liberal constellations will single out this volume from some predecessors that assume a more monolithic and stable view of liberal ideology, but we are also cognizant of more recent work that has engaged very successfully in investigating the comparative features of liberalism. One central aim is to provide a dynamic description of the interplay between political change and conceptual innovation, focusing on how different meanings and vocabularies influence the ways citizens live politics and manoeuvre in the public sphere.

The conference that forms part of the liberalism project envisages a close collaboration among the participants so that certain key questions may be formulated and addressed.

The various conceptions of liberalism meant different things at different times and in different contexts. Hence we are interested in bringing together and comparing the use of the concept in specific contexts of action. One of the conference’s lead questions is whether there developed a kind of macro-historical semantics of “liberalism”, an ideal-type that could be applied to different times and different contexts, or whether the semantics behind the concept, the metaphor or the ideology differed essentially.

This event is planned as a two-day workshop with experts on specific aspects in particular epochs and regions and with young researchers. They do not have to be experts on the historical semantics of the concept, but we encourage all interested

to visit or revisit their source materials with which they are familiar from earlier or current research with a particular focus on the semantic field surrounding the concept of “liberal/liberalism”.

The core questions of the conference will be:

- When and where and in which particular contexts can we identify the first occurrences of key terms such as “liberal ideas”, “liberal opinion”, “liberal party”, “liberal system” which often predated the semantics of “liberalism”?
- Where can we identify shifts in the contemporary meaning and usage of “liberal/liberalism” from the late 18th century to the present?
- How was and how is the concept, and how were and are contrasting and complementary terms applied?
- Is it possible to identify strategic usages of these concepts in particular conflict situations?
- What do the comparative dimension and processes of historical transfer - the import, export and re-import of semantics from other languages and spaces of experience - add to our understanding of the semantics of “liberalism”?

Invited Speakers:

Britain: Michael Freedon (Oxford)

Transatlantic dimensions, USA: Mark Stears (Oxford)

Spain and Ibero-America: Javier Fernandez Sebastian (Bilbao)

Germany in European Comparison: Jörn Leonhard (Freiburg)

Germany: Jan Müller (Princeton)

France: Lucien Jaume, Nicholas Rousselier (Paris)

Asia: Margit Pernau (Berlin)

Italy: Paolo Pombeni (Bologna)

Netherlands: Henk te Velde (Leiden)

Nordic countries: Jeppe Nevers (Odense), Henrik Stenius (Helsinki)

Poland and Eastern Europe: Maciej Janowski (Budapest)

Russia: Alexei Semjonov

Potential diachronic units for analysis "below" particular case-studies are:

1780-1830

1830-1880

1880-1930

1930-2000