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***Histoire du libéralisme en Europe.***  
**Edited by Philippe Nemo and Jean Petitot**  
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According to the standard history of liberal thought as taught in the American academy, this tradition has primeval roots in Greek philosophy, was continued by John Locke, Adam Smith, and the Founding Fathers of the United States, and came into its own in nineteenth century Britain, to be then more or less coterminous with the fate of free-market economic thought (within which the Austrian School may or may not receive special mention). It was by and large an English-speaking tradition and one dominated by an economic perspective. In thematically rather than chronologically ordered books on liberalism, this reductionist distortion is all the more striking, and among English-language publications it is nearly universal. To their great merit, Murray Rothbard, Ralph Raico, and other scholars have challenged this convenient (and politically useful) fiction by recognizing the important impulses coming from scholastic thought, from French and German thinkers of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, but also from Italian, Spanish, and other figures lesser known in English-speaking countries. A most remarkable compendium has now added another weighty blow on 1,427 tightly printed pages.

Under the leadership of professors Philippe Nemo (ESCP-EAP European School of Management in Paris) and Jean Petitot (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and École Polytechnique), a series of seminars on the history of European liberalism was held in Paris between 2001 and 2005. Thirty-six researchers from eight countries presented 38 papers, which have now been published in this volume, either in the French original or in French translation. The articles are arranged in six parts, dealing with the origins of liberal thought, and with liberalism in France, Italy, Germany, Austria, and other European countries (Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Sweden). The breadth of authors and topics covered requires a very selective review concentrating on the atypical rather than on what can also be learned from other publications.

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The editors contributed an introduction which debunks some common myths: that Anglo-Saxon thinkers had a privileged role in the history of liberalism; that liberal ideas were somehow a by-product of the demand for human rights and for democracy; or that human rights thought was exclusively rooted in the Lockean tradition. In fact, liberal thought is of much older vintage, originating in the medieval synthesis between Greco-Roman political and legal traditions and Judeo-Christian moral values. Although the pedigree of liberalism is uniquely European, this body of thought is presented as a “metapolitical” stance, and therefore as “adaptable to very varied cultural traditions and civilizations and as rather neutral with respect to the details of how the state may exercise its sovereign regulatory functions.” The essential is “that the dynamics of catalytic self-organization are preserved” (p. 14). The Misesian language here is deceptive—the ideas of presenting markets as “ecosystems” and of the spontaneity of market participants as an instance of complexity being rather of Hayekian vintage. By including the Kantian tradition because of its respect for personal freedom, the rule of law, and pluralism—as expressed in Kant’s phrase of the “*insociable sociability*” of human beings—the editors set a standard for all contributions to the volume. In American libertarian circles, Kant is—maybe not least because of his latter-day follower John Rawls—typically regarded as a “lesser” liberal and, despite his emphasis on rights, certainly not as a libertarian. But then, this volume does not follow current American categories.

In the contributions to this volume, well over 100 individual thinkers are discussed at least in some detail. The differences in emphasis, approach, and opinion are of course considerable, which makes a summary a moot undertaking. But if one were to look at the tradition from a bird’s eye perspective, from the meta-level of how these liberals thought rather than what they thought, the following commonalities emerge as characteristics of the majoritarian positions of European liberalism:

- (1) “Liberal” is understood in its historical sense, to refer to those who favor the expansion of freedom—quite unapologetically without any modifiers (such as “classical”) or neologisms (such as “libertarianism”).
- (2) No difference is made between economic behavior and other aspects of social behavior, and therefore none between “fiscal” liberals (or, in the American parlance, “conservatives”) and “social” liberals. Freedom is indeed treated as being indivisible.
- (3) Liberal thought developed in various European countries, and it has been deeply shaped by the diversity of societies, cultures, and political circumstances. In the first six decades of the nineteenth century, Italy and Germany were not yet national states, and liberals in these countries were at the forefront of unification movements motivated by the vision of national states rooted in the rule of law. European diversity made liberals also identify preservation of this very diversity as a primary goal. Therefore, for Wilhelm von Humboldt as much as for Benjamin Constant, Antonio Rosmini, Benedetto Croce, or José Ortega y Gasset, freedom must not stop at production, consumption, and trade; it must also amount to a personal freedom and one of culture. Against this background, one can easily see that German and Italian liberalism have always had a stronger inclination towards “positive liberty” rather than the “negative liberty” of Locke and Smith.

- (4) Liberalism, as Hayek has emphasized (p. 1119), is one of three classical positions in political philosophy, together with conservatism and socialism. It does not stand closer to either of these, but liberal thinkers have often absorbed ideas from one of the other camps, or saw their thought gravitate in these directions.
- (5) Liberalism has often had to position itself against an overpowering Catholic Church. This explains why European liberalism can overall be classified as humanist and secular. Catholic thinkers have nevertheless made just as many contributions to the development of liberal thought as have Protestants or others.
- (6) The influence of American (though not that of British) thought on the development of European liberalism has been relatively modest, the few links being Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours, Alexis de Tocqueville, and in recent years the “libertarian” movement (with a marginal impact at best).
- (7) Contrary to the view of the Enlightenment (and particularly of its French branch) that has emerged among American conservative circles, much of Enlightenment thought was liberal by emphasizing human rights, freedom of enterprise and trade, and private property rights. Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, the popularizer of the slogan “*laissez-faire*,” introduced not only a plethora of ideas that became influential for Smith and for generations of liberal economic thought, such as a demand-based theory of price, and the substitution of market prices for “natural” prices. As a minister of finance under Louis XIV, he also reduced government spending, dissolved the guild system, introduced a single tax on property, and abolished the restrictions on the domestic trade in grain.
- (8) Economic freedom is a necessary but not sufficient condition for full human freedom. Relatively free markets may continue under totalitarian regimes whereas free societies are never possible without at least guaranteeing economic freedom. The liberal ideal therefore requires more than “merely” economic freedom: it requires individual rights, the rule of law to safeguard these rights, and all this in a culture that fosters the value of individual dignity. This picture is very different from the abstract and reductionist model of a *homo oeconomicus*. In fact, it is characteristic of European liberalism that the noneconomic case for freedom predominates (as it does for John Stuart Mill).
- (9) If liberalism is understood comprehensively, many thinkers will be included that would not be under a narrow conception. Those thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that advocated pluralism of opinions, religious tolerance, and individual responsibility—Michel de Montaigne, Hugo Grotius, and Pierre Bayle—are in this sense liberals not because they despise the truth but because they believe, like Karl Popper would in the past century, that admission of different views affords a better chance for finding the truth.
- (10) Freedom is at least in a tension with, if not an outright opposition to, democracy. Although some liberals (such as the early utilitarians, but also the Freiburg School) were certainly advocates of democracy, it was hardly of the egalitarian and majoritarian type; an at least equally strong tradition was sceptical as to its compatibility with the liberal ideal (Guizot, Royer-Collard, Constant, Tocqueville, Pareto, Ortega y Gasset, Hayek).

The Austrian School figures prominently, in a section on liberalism in Austria (with contributions by Jörg Guido Hülsmann, Philippe Nemo, Jean Petitot, Robert

Nadeau, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Dario Antiseri, Josef Šima, and Roberta Modugno) but also in an article by Michael Wohlgemuth on the Austrian influence on German liberalism. Hülsmann's contribution embeds Austrian economic thought in older traditions of scholastic and of realist philosophy, and of Enlightenment reformism; it also shows how it reacted to the specific challenges of the multicultural and multilingualistic empire that was Austria-Hungary. Petitot's paper on "Hayek's Theory of the Auto-Organization of Market Order" is the most unusual in the volume. Different from his other contributions to the book, which are dedicated to the history of liberalism, this theoretical paper establishes a link between formal models of the "invisible hand" and evolutionary game theory. While the argument is clear and acceptable, the light game-theoretical models shed on Hayek's theory of the market process (and of pattern recognition) is less obvious. Modugno's paper, "A Dialog between the Austrians and the American Libertarians," is somewhat misplaced in this volume. It describes a largely intra-American dialog between an understanding of values and rights as grounded in natural law or in a consequentialist ethical theory. The debate has little to do with the history of European liberalism except for the origin of some of its protagonists. What is most interesting in this context, however, is the reference to critiques by Rothbard and Raico of Hayek's preference for the "true individualism" of the British empiricists over the "false individualism" of the French rationalists—a preference which betrays a "disparagement of human reason" (pp. 1302f.). Even though this debate over the fundament of liberty—human ignorance or human nature—may appear a home-made issue of American libertarians, it actually builds on divergent strands in European liberal thought.

The main merit of this book may well be the spotlight it directs on figures in the history of liberalism who are traditionally not seen in the context of this tradition at all or who are lesser known outside their countries. Few histories of liberalism include Vilfredo Pareto, who was a fervent opponent of protectionism and of socialism both in his theoretical work and as a journalist, but who abandoned liberal thought in his later sociological writings (Philippe Steiner); few students of liberalism are aware that Richard Cobden's successful fight against the British Corn Laws, which were repealed in 1846, was preceded by a similar fight in France nearly a century earlier, in which Quesnay and Turgot advocated free trade (Philippe Steiner); most history books let Humboldt be the inceptor of German liberal thought, but few will know him to be influenced by the "new German school of natural law" at the end of the eighteenth century or by Jacob Mauvillon (Ralph Raico); few scholars outside theology will have heard of the nineteenth century Italian priests Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio and Antonio Rosmini, both of whom were philosophers of freedom and laid the foundations of Catholic personalism (Paolo Heritier); few people outside Scandinavia know the work of the eighteenth century liberal politician, preacher, and writer, Anders Chydenius, who was born in Finland while it was still a part of Sweden, and who, as a man of the Enlightenment, advocated free trade and industry, a free press, private property rights, and a reduction of state influence (Johan Norberg); few economists are aware that the French philosopher Etienne Bonnot, the Abbé de Condillac, while supporting *laissez-faire* economics, based value on utility and scarcity rather than on Smith's wrong-headed labor cost theory (Alain Laurent); and while some libertarians may be familiar with the name

of the Belgian economist Gustave de Molinari, who carried on the work of Frédéric Bastiat, few will know him as a consistent advocate, already in 1849, of what is today called anarcho-capitalism (Michel Leter). The rainbow this book lets shine over the history of European liberal thought is indeed wide and bright.

The single major weakness of the volume is its exclusion of the British tradition. The editors justify this by wanting to concentrate on “countries generally considered to be non-liberal” (p. 1397). But is this really true? Did not Switzerland, the Netherlands, and at times other countries (for example, Austria–Hungary during the *Gründerzeit*, and even Germany during the Weimar Republic) offer their citizens the rule of law, democratic institutions, a liberal economic policy, and social tolerance, on a par with or close to those of contemporaneous Britain? Did not most Continental countries abolish slavery before Britain did? One can easily understand that the Parisian seminars wanted to focus on the Continental tradition, which may have been less known even to French students. But it is nonetheless inconsistent with the premise of the book, namely that “it is from Continent Europe, more than from the Anglo-Saxon countries, that the most original and most profound theoretical contributions have come, those by Ludwig von Mises, Karl Popper, Friedrich August Hayek, Michael Polanyi, Hannah Arendt, Walter Eucken, Piero Gobetti, Bruno Leoni, etc.” (p. 11). Once again Britain is, in a very artificial way, presented as intellectually isolated from Europe. It has never been so. The links of British liberals with those on the Continent were numerous. Adam Smith quoted from Grotius, Cantillon, Condorcet, and Montesquieu, and he corresponded with Dupont de Nemours; Turgot influenced his economic writings more than anybody else. John Stuart Mill not only stayed at the house of Jean-Baptiste Say; he was also influenced by Grotius, Condillac, Schiller, and particularly by Humboldt. Numerous influences across the Channel in the opposite direction can be found in the pages of this book. There seems indeed little justification for the exclusion of British liberal thought.

Nearly all other points of criticism concern the inclusion or exclusion of particular thinkers, or the truncation of partial histories. For the inclusion of the physiocrats, good arguments may be advanced: for all their fixation on agricultural production, they advocated individualism, private property, the *laissez-faire* system of markets, and free trade. But it is not quite clear why the last French liberal considered in the volume is Charles Renouvier, a Kantian philosopher who embraced intellectual pluralism but was on some counts as critical of liberalism as he supported it on others. Influential liberal intellectuals such as Bertrand de Jouvenel and Jacques Rueff are not mentioned at all. Incidentally, Benjamin Constant and Germaine de Staël were Swiss (and not French) by birth, as were Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi and other members of the “Group of Coppet,” although they may have spent much of their lives in France. In fact, if one added liberal thinkers not mentioned in the volume, such as Henri Frédéric Amiel, Denis de Rougemont, and the *Freisinn* movement, reference to a Swiss tradition of liberalism would have been justified. Inclusion or exclusion again depend on the conception one holds of liberalism. Is it, according to Croce’s famous distinction, a tradition of *liberismo* (i.e., economic freedom based on a utilitarian psychology) or rather a more comprehensive one of *liberalismo* (i.e., a more comprehensive social freedom based on an ethical vision)?

Since the focus of the chapters in this book is on individual protagonists, or on groups of liberal thinkers, a “big picture” does not readily emerge. But this may be a virtue rather than a deficiency, for liberal thought has been a continuous undertaking, and only its influence on actual politics has waxed and waned. Similar arguments have been developed, with or without inspiration from others, and yet at certain periods significant innovation was introduced. Mises’s *Socialism* of 1922, for example, stands in a long tradition of philosophical and social thought that was critical of socialism. Yet it also introduced a new argument—that of economic efficiency: socialism prevents the free formation of prices that alone allows for a (dynamic) balance between supply and demand.

A book of this length consisting of contributions by multiple authors inevitably suggests many questions: Should Lord Acton be counted toward the German or the Italian tradition of liberalism, or toward a transnational-Catholic tradition—for there are but few arguments for making him stand in a British lineage? Is Norberto Bobbio’s “liberal socialism” really still part of the liberal tradition? Are there sufficient reasons for the inclusion of Angelo Tosato? Does Sismondi’s ambiguous attitude to liberalism justify inclusion?

Then there are also questions about the good judgment of some authors. In his piece on “The Czechs and the ‘Austrian’ Ideas,” Josef Šima mentions the Czech members of the Austrian School, František Čuhel and Karel Engliš. But he lets the political influence of liberalism start only with Václav Klaus, whom he accuses of having abandoned a liberal policy. In fact, there was a formidable liberal current in nineteenth century Bohemia. A more magnanimous and less narrowly economic view might have seen the liberal side of the Prague philosopher and priest Bernard Bolzano; it may have included Bolzano’s later colleague Christian von Ehrenfels, who in his value theory tried to combine the subjectivist and marginalist ideas of Carl Menger and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk with those of social Darwinism; and it may even have extended to the first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Masaryk, rather more for his philosophical writings than his nationalist politics.

As must be expected in seminar presentations, some contributions are of greater weight and higher quality than others. Some are mere summaries of positions or compilations of quotes, others are genuinely analytical. The volume of 1,427 pages apparently did not allow for an index of names, a lacuna that is partially redressed by an extensive table of contents at the back of the book. Yet the absence of some contributors to liberal thought is noteworthy: the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus, the Irish-French economist Richard Cantillon, the German historian and poet Friedrich von Schiller, the Spanish diplomat and historian Salvador de Madariaga, the French literary critic Émile Faguet, the German pastor and politician Friedrich Naumann, the Hungarian-British chemist and philosopher Michael Polányi, and the French sociologist Raymond Aron find no discussion, with the exception of a few isolated occurrences of their names.

The book also confirms some interesting facts about the history of European liberalism. It is astounding that, despite the leading role of the Low Countries in commerce and their pathbreaking advocacy of free trade since the seventeenth century, the only significant liberal thinker to have emerged was Grotius. A single exception may be the nineteenth century Dutch historian and politician Johan Rudolf Thorbecke, who finds no mention in this book. The contribution on the Netherlands

presents liberal thought—or rather political organization—as a rather timid phenomenon of the twentieth century.

As an epilogue, the book features the essay “The Meaning of Life and the Measure of Civilizations” by the philosopher Barry Smith. Its main claim is that the meaning of life consists in giving one’s life a certain form “which goes beyond the ordinary” (p. 1406). This standard of success must be public and objectively measurable (as in the list of publications of an academic, the patents of an inventor, or the scores produced by a composer). The liberal order of society is then superior to all others in allowing individuals to follow their own plans and thus to lead meaningful lives. But will Smith’s purely formal criteria suffice? Terrorist attacks can certainly transform the world, imprint a clear form on life, and achieve a measurable “meaning” that is not purely private. Is a civilization that facilitates such creation of “meaning” then superior to others? The long history of ethical reasoning shows that meta-ethics can never substitute for a material ethics of values and rules.

This notwithstanding, the many essays in this valuable volume present enough reasons to develop an interest in the history of liberal thought, and maybe even to believe in the superiority of a liberal order. Nearly all previous histories of liberalism have presented their protagonists in major keys only. This book is unique in bringing together many voices that are set in minor keys as well—from “right-leaning” liberals such as François Guizot and Vilfredo Pareto to “left-leaning liberals” such as Guido Calogero and Wilhelm Röpke. On balance, of course, the advantage of having a more comprehensive notion of liberalism that includes all the “party of freedom” without applying a doctrinaire straightjacket must be weighed against the danger of trivializing this tradition by extending the concept indiscriminately. Most citizens of liberal thought are, as this book demonstrates, above such categorization on one or the other end of the scale; their ideal of free individuals peacefully pursuing their own plans without hindrance is indeed indivisible. Exactly such a comprehensive view has been badly needed, even though the nature of the book makes it rather a compendium than a systematic work of intellectual history. One would wish that, despite its length, this volume would become available in an English translation. There can be no doubt that this would help dispel many skewed views on the history and nature of liberal thought in the American academy and beyond.