Liberalism's Historical Diversity
A Comparative Conceptual Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Rooted in late seventeenth-century theories of rights, liberal ideas have brought forth since the nineteenth century a full-fledged complex of traditions in moral, political, economic, social, and legal thought. Yet in historiographical debates such complexity is often blurred by presenting it under the uniform terms of a canon. Along with other methods, conceptual history is contributing to the rediscovery of liberalism's diversity. This group of articles compiles three conceptual studies on scarcely explored aspects of the history of *liberalism* in Denmark, Finland, and Hungary—countries whose political past has only occasionally figured in mainstream accounts of European liberalism. This introductory article is a methodological discussion of the rationale and forms in which liberalism's historical diversity is rendered through comparative conceptual research. After reflecting on the limits of the Anglophone history of political thought to grasp the plurality of liberal traditions, the article examines how transnational conceptual histories recast the understanding of *liberalism* as a concept, theory, ideology, and political movement.

KEYWORDS

comparative conceptual history, conceptual change, liberal historiography, liberalism, methodology, political thought

Over the last decades, a number of research projects have taken on the conceptual historical study of national political and social languages, thus providing a novel testing ground to set forth comparative histories of concepts.[1] The interest in what Jacques Guilhaumou called "l'histoire langagière des concepts" has gradually moved to center stage of methodological debates in the humani-

1. See, for example, "The European Conceptual History Project (ECHP): Mission Statement," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 1 (2011): 111–116.

ties and the social sciences.[2] To this endeavor the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* remains the inspirational project, whose guidelines have been critically discussed, and selectively assumed, by new research programs.

Yet more important than the lexicon (whose methodology Reinhart Koselleck continued to refine for about forty years[3]) are the ensuing debates. They have set the tone for a rediscovery of the history and historicity of social and political thought, and hence of vocabularies and ideologies. The adoption of *begriffsgeschichtliche* tools has entailed questioning other historiographical methods, in particular the history of ideas, for using concepts anachronistically and dismissing the role of political agents, other than intellectuals, in the production and spread of political knowledge.[4] All in all, as intellectual history from the 1960s on illustrates, methodological divergence does not exhaust the chances of complementariness, and the practice of *Begriffsgeschichte* attests to an expansive cooperation with other approaches, from rhetorical or argumentative analysis and speech act theory to discourse analysis and the morphological study of ideologies.

Acknowledging Liberalisms

Until recently, however, most historical research on *liberalism* has been published in distinct academic spheres—its conceptual and ideological appraisal still divided by scholarly languages, methods, and curricula. The spread of conceptual history has contributed to enabling communication between those spheres, thus gradually integrating advances in comparative research. It is within this context that liberalism's history is being rewritten in contemporary scholarship: first, as a concept or an idea whose original meanings arose in modern philosophical debates on individual autonomy and legitimate government, yet were only formulated as a concept of liberalism in eighteenth-century constitutional languages; second, as a corresponding theory explaining morality, politics, economy, society, and the law from the outlook of individual freedoms—their sources, conditions, strifes, and consequences; third, as a political ideology molded by liberalism's vocabulary through the nineteenth

2. Jacques Guilhaumou, *Discours et événement: L'histoire langagière des concepts* [Discourse and event: The language-bound history of concepts] (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2006), 43–86.

3. Reinhart Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten: Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache* [Concept histories: Studies in the semantics and pragmatics of political and social language], with two contributions by Ulrike Spree and Willibald Steinmetz, and a postface by Carsten Dutt (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006), 7–102.

4. Kari Palonen, "The History of Concepts as a Style of Political Theorizing: Quentin Skinner's and Reinhart Koselleck's Subversion of Normative Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 1, no. 1 (2002): 91–106.

century from both the root word "liberal" and the wider semantic field of "freedom" in modern languages, yet in turn providing concepts with unprecedented, integrated meanings; and fourth, as a reformist political movement envisaged by liberalism's ideology.[5]

Two historiographical contributions help illustrate this polyhedric configuration process that displays *liberalism* as a politically contested concept grown out of late eighteenth-century constitutional debates in America and Europe[6] and that examines liberalism becoming a moral, political, economic, social, and legal theory whose principles, rooted in early modern philosophy, underpinned the exploration of contemporary events.[7] Furthermore, it is a process that spells out the liberal conceptual constellation forging the ideology of liberalism by integrating throughout the nineteenth century a basic set of concepts, namely, liberty, individuality, rationality, sociability, and limited government, around the political value of individual freedom.[8] And, finally, it is a process that accounts for liberalism identifying a political movement spreading the creed of civil freedoms and constitutional government, aiming at establishing constitutional regimes the world over, becoming especially instrumental in the independence of new nations and in the rising of welfare states.[9]

The first study is Rudolf Vierhaus's 1982 article "Liberalismus" in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe,* which already outlined the framework for comparative research. The article registers the transnational semantic change of the concept from the space of morality into revolutionary, constitutional languages.[10] That configuring process, "auf dem Wege zum politischen Begriff"

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5. I freely draw from Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 47–95.

6. Argued and counterargued by political representatives in modern parliaments. Along with intellectuals, members of liberal parties saw themselves as liberal political agents opposing nonliberals, namely, conservatives, and antiliberals or reactionaries. See, for example, for the case of liberals in 1810–1813 Cádiz Cortes (Spain's parliament), Marieta Cantos and Alberto Ramos, "Las Cortes de Cádiz y el primer liberalismo. Élites políticas, ideologías, prensa y literatura. Aportaciones y nuevos retos," *Ayer: Revista de Historia Contemporánea,* no. 85 (2012): 23–47.

7. Representative of those trends in liberal theory are the works of authors such as, respectively, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, or John Rawls; Benjamin Constant, L. T. Hobhouse, or Norberto Bobbio; Adam Smith, John Maynard Keynes, or Amartya Sen; Max Weber, Raymond Aron, or Ralf Dahrendorf; and François Rolin, Hans Kelsen, or Joseph Raz.

8. Eminently symbolized by John Stuart Mill's 1859 essay *On Liberty.* See the analysis of liberalism's "Millite core" by Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory,* 144–154.

9. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 14–45.

10. Rudolf Vierhaus, "Liberalismus," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland,* Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982; Studienausgabe, 2004), 744–755.

(on the way to the political concept), is presented through a series of almost parallel developments in France, Britain, Spain, and Germany, happening over the span of some three decades since the end of the eighteenth century. Unlike diachronic studies of semantic changes, synchronic comparisons among political languages entail an alternative understanding of conceptual changes devised in terms of transnational semantic transfers.

The second study, published almost three decades later, is the multiauthor article "Liberalismo" from the *Iberconceptos* project, currently underway. Its introductory essay argues that the early "peninsular crisis of 1807–1814 and the subsequent Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian revolutions" triggered a process of unexpected transnational reconceptualizations of political languages. As documented in various thesauri, newspapers, and political publications, by 1820 liberalism's basic vocabulary was in use in most of the Iberian-American world.[11] The new political vocabulary was illustrated by Portuguese terms such as *nação liberal, partido liberal,* and *representação nacional,* and the Spanish terms *constitución liberal, gobierno liberal, nación liberal,* and *partido liberal.* As an adjective, *liberal* and its plural forms *liberais* and *liberales* qualified a distinct political stance endorsing liberal ideas, most remarkably the advancement of individual freedoms and the principles of constitutional government; as names, they mainly identified the advocates, and the parliamentary representatives, of liberal parties. In the long run, the emerging liberal vocabulary restructured traditional political lexica and national political cultures in a sequence that mirrored comparable changes elsewhere.

Attention to comparative research on liberalism arose in the first decades of the twentieth century, joining the standard works on the history of philosophy and political history. Only afterward did research extend to political languages. We can appreciate the length of the latter intellectual journey by noting the distance traveled from Guido De Ruggiero's 1925 book, *Storia del liberalismo europeo,*[12] to Jörn Leonhard's *Liberalismus,* published in 2001.[13] The

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11. Javier Fernández Sebastián, "Liberalismos nacientes en el Atlántico iberoamericano. 'Liberal' como concepto y como identidad política, 1750–1850" [Nascent liberalisms in the Iberoamerican Atlantic: 'Liberal' as concept and as political identity, 1750–1850], in *Iberconceptos*, J. Fernández Sebastián, ed., vol. I, *Diccionario político y social del mundo iberoamericano: La era de las revoluciones, 1750–1850* [Political and social dictionary of the Iberoamerican world: The age of revolutions, 1750–1850], C. Aljovín de Losada et al., eds. (Madrid: Fundación Carolina-SECC-CEPC, 2009), 704.

12. Guido De Ruggiero, *Storia del liberalismo europeo* [History of European liberalism], new ed. (Bari: Laterza, 1995), 110–363. Originally published 1925.

13. Jörn Leonhard, *Liberalismus: Zur historischen Semantik eines europäischen Deutungsmusters* [Liberalism: On the historical semantics of a European interpretive pattern] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2001), 127–504.

former is a book in the tradition of the history of ideas, though also an epic chronicle of political history, whereas the latter is a book on historical semantics, dealing also with comparative politics.

De Ruggiero's book is a comparative account rendered in terms of national liberal traditions, namely, English, French, German, and Italian, "the historical forms of liberalism," whose overview justifies the general name, "European liberalism," as both an intellectual and a political movement.[14] Leonhard's research draws on the diversity of national political languages, still from the same four national traditions, though aiming to decode their many semantic transfers, which on the whole yield a different view of European liberalism. Along with authoritative, standard documents, its primary sources include dictionaries, speeches, essays, correspondence, and journalistic pieces that recount how liberal ideas were produced and transmitted, namely, formulated by parties' ideological platforms, argued by politicians in parliaments, and circulated in Europe's publicistic spheres. It is a comparative conceptual history. Conceivably, its comparative account could be further utilized by moving attention away from parameters of classification, and refocusing on the conceptual paths that entwine the histories of *European liberalisms* beyond those mainstream traditions.

What follows is a methodological discussion of the rationale and forms in which the history of liberalism is being rewritten. Opening with a reflection on the interpretive limits of Anglophone history of political thought in grasping the plurality of liberal traditions, the article proceeds with a presentation of how transnational conceptual histories recast the understanding of liberalism as a concept, theory, ideology, and political movement. Liberalism's historical diversity is traced in the following sections to its origins as a constitutional language, and then to liberalism's later role, since the nineteenth century, as an inspiration to a growing series of reformist movements the world over. The last section introduces the three studies on the history of European liberalisms that follow.

Of Complexity and Historiographical Canons

Liberalism grows out of the intersections of modern political traditions. This complexity is often blurred in historiographical debates by presenting liberalism under the uniform terms of a canon, in which its core principles override most other aspects, especially its relational and comparative features. Canons provide interpretative frameworks. Scholars apply their guidelines to assess

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14. De Ruggiero, *Storia del liberalismo europeo,* 462–472.

traditions of thought. As normative references, guidelines are open to critical reappraisals, and such hermeneutic dynamics produces the characteristic effect that interpretations can be indefinitely discussed: every new interpretation revises a previous one, thus participating in clearly framed debates.

Contested as canons may be, because of such circularity, they simplify the transmission of knowledge, and this economic logic explains their success at the expense of real variance and, more precisely, of epistemological complexity. In their aim to understand the past, canons provide research with a precious certainty: scholars speak a common language, work under a homogeneous semantic atmosphere, and debate against an easily discernible intellectual background. Even if scholars criticize canonical assumptions, and even if as a result they are seriously revised, canons keep their epistemological status—challenged, reshaped, but afloat.

Consider in this respect Alan Ryan's magnificent *The Making of Modern Liberalism,*[15] compiling papers written throughout more than four decades. A wide-ranging account of the history of liberal political thought combining conceptual analysis with thematic research, Ryan's is a prominent example of Anglophone canonical liberalism, largely built on the approach of the history of ideas.[16] The volume was not intended as a historical handbook, but contains many outstanding pieces of intellectual history, covering nineteenth- and twentieth-century classics, from John Stuart Mill to Tocqueville, Russell, Dewey, Popper, Berlin, and Rawls, and also the prehistory of liberalism in the works of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

The introduction includes a brief section on "Liberalism and its History," whose main contention is focused on the origins of liberal political thought: "[L]iberalism required a particular intellectual and moral outlook and ways of conceptualizing moral and political issues that existed in no ancient society, but it did not require any particular social, economic, or political structure."[17] Looking into the book's essays, however, the author's argument refers also to liberal thought's later history and the inner passages that linked ideas and thinkers from different epochs. It avoids the allure of sociologism, but stays within the interpretive boundaries of a canon, which, for example, make intelligible his thesis of a "Hobbesian liberalism" referred to Mill. Ryan acknowledges that "Hobbes was not a liberal," but "many things about his political theory would sustain a form of liberalism, and he held many of the attitudes

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15. Alan Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

16. See John Plamenatz's panoramic essay, "Liberalism," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas,* Philip P. Wiener, ed., vol. III (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 36–61.

17. Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism,* 7.

typical of later defenders of liberty."[18] He accordingly claims that "Mill built a very un-Hobbesian superstructure on Hobbesian foundations."[19]

Clearly, Ryan's historiographical contributions become fully comprehensible in the language of Anglophone liberalism, which nowadays remains the hegemonic tradition in the history of political thought. However, to a great extent, the most we can get from a canon is to refine its views over time, endlessly, but we would always climb on the shoulders of the same giants, and reproduce variations of standard arguments, thus keeping the same hermeneutic framework and yielding somehow foreseeable judgments.

Lacking such certainty, liberalism's conceptual history aims to revise this canonical view that presents its history largely as the development of an idea or normative ideal. Conceptual history entails assessing semantic changes and exploring the diverse historical settings where concepts are semantically recast, while comparative conceptual history maps those transnational paths. In this regard, over the last few decades, comparative research has documented the asynchronous and transnational rise of liberalism as concept, theory, ideology, and political movement, thus questioning the hegemony of the Anglophone canon to provide a reliable scientific account of its past.

Diversity through Comparative Conceptual Research

Liberalism's meanings were not prefigured in its philosophical antecedents. They have been created by the conceptualizations of an original series of ideas that first produced a conceptual constellation, and the primary theoretical corpora, in the 1790s. The passage into a recognizable ideology took place in different parts of Europe shortly afterward, thus opening paths of conceptual changes in different languages throughout the world. Reshaped by an ever-growing polysemy, liberalism's vocabulary has become semantically denser: not only have historical usages generated novel conceptualizations—such as the ideas of indigenous, colonial liberalism in nineteenth-century India[20] or Islamic liberalism since the twentieth century[21]—they have transformed liberalism's original semantic matrix in ways and degrees that can only be fully appraised from transnational perspectives.

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18. Ibid., 182, expanded in pages 56–58, 182–185, and 216–219.
19. Ibid., 8, further developed in pages 292–325 and 361–363.
20. Rochana Bajpai, "Liberalisms in India: A Sketch," in *Liberalism as Ideology: Essays in Honour of Michael Freeden,* Ben Jackson and Marc Stears, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 61–64.
21. Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 85–127.

A nineteenth-century liberal could hardly anticipate that press freedom would eventually be applicable beyond the reach of the printed word, while a twenty-first-century liberal would find the earliest ideas of freedom of speech unqualified to address modern forms of intolerance and censorship.[22] Compare also the treatment of economic inequality in Mill's analysis of taxation, drawn from Adam Smith, to Sen's or Dworkin's ethico-economic theories relating tax effects and welfare,[23] a link that in the past was not considered relevant enough to tackle inequality and, more precisely, poverty; or consider the remark that the 1790s meaning of *idées libérales* became hardly perceptible as *liberal* two centuries later in French political debates,[24] the only semantic continuity being constitutional. Liberal ideas such as the civil freedoms of association, press, property, religion and thought, and political freedoms linked to the development of constitutional government were then all-pervasive, with even stronger intensity than in the past. Yet to be liberal, as measured by theoretical and policy assumptions, turned out to signify the opposite of what it had formerly meant.

Rather than taking these conceptual changes as revisions from within fairly homogeneous traditions, a comparative approach adds a set of analytical references made of diverse, partially intersecting traditions to explain semantic changes and their consequences. In this sense, the sweeping redescription of the idea of press freedom, its new precariousness elucidated by the contingent advance of freedoms, is further illuminated by its convergent experience in non-Western countries. When targeting economic inequality, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) balanced Western taxation schemes with poverty reduction policies tested elsewhere, initially in South Asia. The results, epitomized by Amartya Sen's contributions to the UNDP, namely, increasing public investment in women's education, amount to a comprehensive reinterpretation of the ideas of equality and welfare. What happens in France's political debates happens in most Iberian-American countries too: liberalism is mostly described by the stereotypical image of one of its traditions, economic liberalism, as antipublic and antiegalitarian—

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22. See Jytte Klausen's reflections in her *The Cartoons That Shook the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 167–184.

23. Of Mill, see his 1848 treatise, *The Principles of Political Economy,* bk. V, chs. ii–vi, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill,* vol. III, John M. Robson, ed., introduction by V. W. Bladen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 805–872; Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 87–110; Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11–119.

24. See Monique Canto-Sperber, *Le libéralisme et la gauche* [Liberalism and the Left] (Paris: Hachette, 2008), 355–369.

in other words, antisocialist.[25] The rhetorical or argumentative force of anti-liberal views, meant for electoral purposes, swiftly embraced other realms, including the academic domain, such effective redescription of liberalism becoming commonplace.[26]

Of all reconceptualizations, probably the most noteworthy is what Michael Freeden highlighted as "the complex movement of liberalism from an assumedly individualistic, even atomistic, theory of human nature and social structure towards something at the heart of welfare-state thinking."[27] To dismiss that semantic move is to lose the perspective of liberalism's real diversity, not only ideological but most notably conceptual. However, the advantages of approaching diversity through comparative research methods do not come up spontaneously.

First, comparative exploration is required to argue that conceptual changes partly respond to foreign influences and cannot be fully spelled out just by referring to endogenous, national factors. Second, a further step should be taken to argue that semantic transfers cannot be brought down in explanatory terms to one single tradition or ideological language. This does not mean that traditions are incommensurable. Their semantic codes can be explained and their concepts translated,[28] no matter how different their corresponding words are. Rather, a noncomparative account is unavoidably reductionist. And third, a comparative account does not stop at the finding of terminological variants, but continues in the study of their changing uses.

Critically relying on comparative and transfer methodologies, new approaches such as *histoire croisée* (crossed history) and "entangled history" explore hitherto disregarded aspects of comparisons. Whereas comparative research largely focuses on synchronic analysis, and transfers draw diachronic

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25. *Le Monde diplomatique*'s editorial line exemplifies this view. The monthly journal aims at providing "a critical view" of the media's "blind spots," one of them being the "ravages du dogme libéral" (the havocs of liberal dogma). See its editorial statement, *Qui sommes-nous?* [Who are we?], at http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/diplo/apropos/ (accessed 29 July 2013).

26. See the ironic presentation of French left-wing intellectuals' antiliberalism by Raymond Boudon, *Pourquoi les intellectuels n'aiment pas le libéralisme* [Why intellectuals don't love liberalism] (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004), 127–208; see also a cogent defense of liberal ideas in Latin American academic debates by Rodolfo Vázquez, *Liberalismo, Estado de derecho y minorías* [Liberalism, rule of law and minorities] (Mexico: Paidós-UNAM, 2001), 31–81.

27. Michael Freeden, *Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

28. See Melvin Richter, "Introduction: Translation, the History of Concepts and the History of Political Thought," in *Why Concepts Matter: Translating Social and Political Thought,* Martin J. Burke and Melvin Richter, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1–40.

views, *histoire croisée* pays attention to the "intersections" or "intercrossings" among research objects,[29] and entangled history addresses the social and cultural effects of transnational exchanges.[30] Comparative conceptual histories aim to revise nationally bound accounts of conceptual changes by exploring their transnational crossing paths. Werner and Zimmermann claim the heuristic potential of *histoire croisée* by indicating how the reflexive relation that historians establish with both their research objects and methods is further expanded, in time and space, when constructing and transmitting historical knowledge. Entangled history explores this reflexive aspect in the subjects of historical exchanges, and comparative conceptual histories can refine it by undertaking cross-critical reflections on the consequences of conceptual changes as examined from transnational perspectives.

The mere observation that a single political vocabulary in the Anglophone and non-Anglophone worlds has opposite definitions for certain terms, for example, the very meaning of *liberalism* or the ascription of the *liberal* label as noun and as adjective, does not suffice to explain liberalism's conceptual diversity. They confirm the semantic malleability of liberalism's vocabulary, appreciable in its historically diverse uses, and the polysemy of ideological concepts. However, the relevant aspect of exploring diversity through comparative research lies in the effects of temporal and transnational conceptual paths. As this group of articles convey, in the case of liberalism, political actors may use foreign concepts to vindicate their own alternative, liberal identities, and rhetorically adapt them to account for changes in national politics. That way they get to actually redescribe and reconceptualize them; but more remarkably, their actions become political innovations springing from conceptual changes. The risks of reproducing the patterns of a canon are always lurking, but focusing attention on agents, vocabularies, and pragmatic uses to explore conceptual changes mitigates them.

Liberalism as Constitutional Language and Reformist Ideology

Liberalism's intellectual antecedents can be traced to seventeenth-century natural law and contractualist theories, which form the basis of modern constitutionalism.[31] From the outlook of conceptual analysis their most original

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29. Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity," *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 30–50.

30. Margrit Pernau, "Whither Conceptual History? From National to Entangled Histories," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 7, no. 1 (2012): 1–11.

31. See, for example, Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 143–155; Lucien Jaume, *La liberté et la loi: Les origines philosophiques du libéralisme* [Liberty and the law: Liberalism's philosophical

feature was probably the weaving of a language of rights. Devised by philosophers, enshrined in legal documents belonging to diverse legal traditions, spoken in parliaments, and ceaselessly renewed ever since, this language of rights inspired in time the emancipatory reaction of the American War of Independence in the 1770s and the later overthrowing of France's Ancien Régime. Revolutionary events crystallized into constitutional moments and these, in turn, into benchmarks for political action. The constitutional acknowledgment of individual freedoms, cast across the debates on the Bill of Rights in America and the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, provided the distinctive token of political changes.[32] In both the ratifying process of the American Constitution and the French constituent debates, the language of rights became the new language of politics. Drawn on early modern moral, political, and legal vocabularies conceptualizing ideas such as autonomy, consent, contract, equality, legitimate government, liberty, right, and sovereignty, it transformed their semantic codes by redescribing their meanings against the system of institutions of the new states.

Thus, the liberal language of politics came up as a constitutional creation performed under the experimental conditions of establishing new regimes. "Revolutions," Hannah Arendt noticed, "are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning."[33] A visionary stock projecting emancipatory ideals onto the future, the liberal language of politics was no descriptive tool but a legitimizing resource wielded to vindicate and bring about regime changes. Liberal ideas inspired constituent moments, but also accounted for reforms in the economy, from lifting customs barriers on international trade to introducing progressive taxation; in the law, from easing labor regulations aimed at improving working conditions, though also worker mobility, to humanizing the penal codes; or in the society, from further secularizing public morality to universalizing access to education.[34]

Not the only reformist ideology, liberalism's reform paths eventually crossed with those of socialism because of their concerns for equality. How-

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origins] (Paris: Fayard, 2000), 11–31; and Charles Howard McIlwain, *Constitutionalism: Ancient and Modern,* rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1947), 123–146.

32. Knud Haakonssen, "From Natural Law to the Rights of Man: A European Perspective on American Debates," in *A Culture of Rights: The Bill of Rights in Philosophy, Politics, and Law—1791 and 1991,* Michael J. Lacey and Knud Haakonssen, eds. (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center/Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19–61.

33. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), 21.

34. See, for example, Joseph A. Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis,* Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter, ed., with an introduction by Mark Perlman, new ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 393–406. Originally published 1954. See also Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred: The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud,* vol. III (New York: Norton, 1993), 130–141, 265–287.

ever, these were rather different indeed, for *in the name of equality* divergent meanings were implied. Early nineteenth-century socialism, Phelps Brown noted, was not egalitarian, at least not in the sense that early nineteenth-century liberal ideology came up with. Even if both liberal and socialist policies addressed the problem of exploitation of workers, early European socialists, with the exception of the Babeuf-inspired tradition, downgraded the principle of equality of income, which meant *equal work, equal pay*.[35] Yet, leaving aside the standard presentation of socialist equality as a teleological notion envisaging an egalitarian political order, the idea of liberal equality differed substantially from socialist equality in its conception of rights, particularly political rights. Moreover, it was the idea of liberal equality, and the gradualist, nonrevolutionary understanding of reformism, that explained the attunement of liberal politics with parliamentarism. Only afterward was the parliamentary system endorsed by a revised version of socialism, namely, social democracy.[36] To this extent, as bespoken by the Nordic countries' experience, liberal tenets' programmatic imprint on the rise of welfare states became as decisive as that of social democratic ideas.[37]

As a political ideology, liberalism was guided by the belief that the advancement of liberties would ameliorate the human condition and, relatedly, that a limited government had the duty of protecting and promoting individual freedoms. In the passage from theory to practice, liberalism's original meaning gave rise to emancipatory narratives that translated into nationally adapted policies. Thus, they put its normative consistency to a test, revealing the distance separating the liberal ideology from liberalisms in practice and how differently, and even contradictorily, it was applied across the world. Civil, political, and social rights assembled a reformist program whose policies began to be tested in different countries. Within Europe, the nineteenth-century development of social legislation in England and Wales,[38] predating other pioneering cases such as the Netherlands, was boosted by the extension of citizenship rights, starting in the 1830s, almost running parallel with comparable reforms in France and Switzerland. Furthermore, other significant reforms followed elsewhere, namely, the constitutionalization of social rights since the last decades of the nineteenth century in what were considered at the

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35. Henry Phelps Brown, *Egalitarianism and the Generation of Inequality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 171–175.

36. See Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 28–46.

37. Bo Stråth, "The Normative Foundations of the Scandinavian Welfare States in Historical Perspective," in *Normative Foundations of the Welfare State: The Nordic Experience*, Nanna Kildal and Stein Kuhnle, eds. (London: Routledge, 2005), 34–51.

38. Bernard Harris, *The Origins of the British Welfare State: Society, State, and Social Welfare in England and Wales, 1800–1945* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

time *liberal* France's Third Republic and *nonliberal* regimes such as Bismarck's Second Reich and Restoration Spain.[39]

Such moves substantiate the spread of liberalism as a political movement across national boundaries in a reformist sequence, which occurred almost simultaneously with Latin America's independence wave and later on, since the twentieth century, in parts of Asia and Africa. They also reflect liberalism's endurance as an ideology through the most diverse political cultures. Yet at the turn of the twentieth century its chances as a political movement seemed lost, as Europe's power politics overturned the hopes raised by the ideal of progress.[40] Europe's colonial politics proved the expectations of a spread of liberal regimes to non-Western countries illusory.

Liberalism's Failure and Recovery

As it happens, the *liberally* redefined ideal of progress was called into question by the fact that the new international system, bearing the ethos of liberal and humanitarian ideals, arose because of colonial expansion.[41] The paradox that the spread of international law and imperialism proceeded hand in hand left a very narrow margin to justify their compatibility. At most, the "Colonial Empire," as Hobhouse observed in the British case, was "founded on self-government," hence "the colonies include the most democratic communities in the world."[42] Foreign policy debates in imperial states changed the perception of regional conflicts into international ones, and yet international law proved hopeless in denouncing and curbing the violation of rights by imperial powers in colonial territories.[43] The Crimean War, from 1853 to 1856, marking the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, illustrated the unmistakable blend of diplomatic mobilization and military interventions in geostrategic areas that secured the ideal of peace just in Europe, until the conflict of interests

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39. Gerhard A. Ritter, "Der deutsche Sozialstaat: Anfänge, historische Weichenstellungen und Entwicklungstendenzen" [The German social state: Origins, historical paths and development trends], in *Grundlagen des Sozialstaats* [Foundations of the social state], A. Rauscher, ed. (Cologne: Bachem, 1998), 11–44; María Dolores Calle, *La Comisión de Reformas Sociales: 1883–1903. Política social y conflicto de intereses en la España de la Restauración* [The Commission of Social Reforms: 1883–1903. Social policies and interest conflicts in Restoration Spain] (Madrid: Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 1989).

40. Reinhart Koselleck, "'Fortschritt' und 'Niedergang': Nachtrag zur Geschichte zweier Begriffe" ["Progress" and "regress": Postscript to the history of two concepts], in *Begriffsgeschichten,* 178–180.

41. Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law, 1870–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 88–97.

42. L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1911), 240.

43. Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations,* 166–178.

reached the core of the continent. By 1914, the "pragmatic pacifism" of what Karl Polanyi termed "the hundred years' peace" was altogether drained of its meaning.[44]

By then liberal politics had lost most of its reformist capacity. If the rise of anticolonialism had discredited the foreign policy of Western governments, the outbreak of World War I uncovered the frailty of the world order and, more bluntly, of the political regimes underpinning its liberal blueprint. The uncertainty of the epoch was grasped as the epitome of *liberalism in crisis,* and this became a historiographical motif of its own, causally linked to the fall of parliamentary democracies through the first decades of the twentieth century.[45]

Yet the breakdown of democracies in Western Europe brought to light the resiliency of liberal regimes elsewhere in the continent, such as for a time in the Nordic countries. The inaccurate image of the "fall of liberalism" described indeed part of the complex history of European liberalisms. Moreover, the asymmetric rise and fall of liberal polities further help understand that, upon their recovery since the mid-1940s, the spread of liberalism as a political movement also embraced countries like Turkey, which had just entered into a democratization process. And still, when in the last decade of the century another wave of democratization was triggered in East Central Europe, paradoxically a new discourse on crisis emerged when liberal ideas dawned throughout the non-Western world.[46]

Liberalism's Historical Diversity

Arguably, it was not the same *liberalism* in all cases, since liberal ideas and policies regarding the advance of political freedoms were championed anew for reasons as diverse as political nationalism, economic modernization, the cause of human rights, and democratization, none of them fairly coinciding with the original tenets of the liberal ideology. Liberalism's historical diversity lies not in its semantic variety as such, but rather in the transnational paths of its manifold dimensions as concept, theory, ideology, and political move-

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44. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 3–19. Citations refer to the Beacon Press edition.

45. See the illustrative case of "The Fall of Liberalism" presented by Eric Hobsbawm in his *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), 109–141.

46. See Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land: A Treatise on our Present Discontents* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

ment. Accordingly, the histories of the concept of liberalism denote not just the recastings of its original meanings, and its expansive conceptual constellation, but also the many ways it is used to redescribe the past and to inspire real changes. Liberalism's conceptual trajectory reveals how its meanings have been unremittingly contested over the past two centuries, and this illuminates the fact that the same conceptual cluster has become amazingly polysemous, even embracing opposite views. Its polysemy is not a theoretical elaboration, but the outcome of historical agents' living uses.

The following articles survey the uses of *liberalism* as a reservoir of legitimacy in arguments that catalyzed decisive political changes in two countries, Finland and Denmark, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and a third country, Hungary, a century later. The three cases present the circumstances surrounding each liberal transition from the vantage point of professional politicians. Unlike intellectuals, they gained their liberal pedigree acting in party politics. Not only did the sequence of events reflect, especially in Hungary, what Ralf Dahrendorf termed the "fears of open societies" when confronted with the task of abandoning oppositional politics. Dissidents becoming politicians embody what the loss of intellectual security means, and the paradigmatic "liberal dilemma" between the free exercise of reason and party loyalty.[47]

Liberalism becomes a political legacy in dispute in late nineteenth-century Finland, argues Jussi Kurunmäki in his article, when Finnish-language nationalists find troublesome their accommodation with Swedish-language liberals, and claim their national-liberal identity as a comparable political position. Out of a history of growing discredit, liberalism, indeed, "bourgeois liberalism", is reinvented against socialism over the first decades of the twentieth century in Denmark. As Jeppe Nevers remarks, in the context of wartime commercial regulations, which lasted approximately until 1930, economic liberalism legitimates the upgrading of Danish political liberalism. Finally, as Ferenc Laczó documents in his article, since the 1990s in Hungary, when a postcommunist democracy is created and former dissident intellectuals enter professional politics, liberalism becomes the only available political alternative, and its former semantic codes are reinterpreted in light of an incipient democratic vocabulary.

From varying perspectives, the analyses reveal that *liberalism* and *liberal* become tokens of identity in political debates to vindicate distinct, reformist political stances, and so are used as political means to mark distance from al-

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47. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Der Wiederbeginn der Geschichte: Vom Fall der Mauer zum Krieg im Irak* [History's new beginning: From the fall of the Wall to the war in Iraq] (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2004), 30–42, 188–196.

legedly nonliberal adversaries—the rhetorical effect of what Koselleck called "asymmetrical counter-concepts."[48] The cases studied expose a stunningly strong opposition between liberalism and socialism, or communism. Yet opposition, while visible in public debates, stands at the level of electoral discourses, where they are meant as counterconcepts. Ideological differences remain, but with regard to policy issues, they partially fade away. The experience in government teaches political parties pragmatism, which entails a decrease in ideological belligerence and hence a less idealized use of liberal concepts.

Linked to the aim of upholding a progressivist view, the argumentative uses of the concept of *liberalism* advance a new kind of adversarial politics that is downright ideological. Arguments in defense of civil and political freedoms then serve the cause both of redescribing the recent past to differentiate liberal from nonliberal positions but, above all, of rhetorically anticipating the immediate future in the middle of electoral contests. The three articles' rhetorical treatment fairly assume Hans Blumenberg's dictum according to which "the concept cannot express everything that reason demands,"[49] and their aim is to explain the meaningful features of political actions that conceptual accounts without rhetorical analysis would be unable to render.

48. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 211–259; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time,* Keith Tribe, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 155–191.

49. Hans Blumenberg, "Der Begriff vermag nicht alles, was die Vernunft verlangt," in *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit* [Theory of nonconceptuality], Anselm Haverkamp, ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 11.